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MARQUISE DE SÉVIGNÉ.

FEMINIST WRITERS
OF THE
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

BY
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**FEMINIST WRITERS
OF THE XVIIth CENTURY,**

With Special Reference to FRANÇOIS POULAIN DE LA BARRE.

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**(Thesis approved for the Degree of Master of Arts in
the University of London).**

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P R E F A C E.

THE emancipation of women and the agitation in favour of female suffrage, which are commonly regarded as the latest social developments, and as especially associated with this country, are not new, nor did they originate in England. It is to France, France of the seventeenth century, that we must look if we would trace the movement from its birth. The literary and social supremacy of the *Précieuses*, short-lived though it was, paved the way for a serious advocacy of the equality of the sexes, and we find in the feminist writers of the day views as advanced as any put forward at the present time.

In England, the movement in favour of female suffrage may be said to date from 1832, when the Reform Bill disfranchised women by the insertion of the word "male" before the word "person," and in 1868 the Court of Common Pleas authoritatively declared it illegal for women to vote. What was

generally known as the question of Women's Rights had, however, been raised long before that date. In 1792 there had appeared a treatise entitled the *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, by Mary Wollstonecraft, which owed its inspiration largely to France, but was essentially English in tone and tendency.

The Renaissance may be looked upon as the cradle of the feminist movement. It set free and gave dignity to many human activities which had been repressed by mediæval Christianity. The pale, ascetic virgin who evoked the admiration of the Middle Ages gave way to a more robust and natural type of womanhood. At a time when beauty played so large a part in men's ideas, the sexuality of woman was perhaps unduly accentuated, but, at the same time, she was encouraged to devote herself to intellectual pursuits. It was in the seventeenth century, in France, that she became of paramount importance both through her social position and her influence on literature. It was then that the question of the emancipation of women—or women's rights—was first discussed. It continued to occupy men's minds during the first half of the eighteenth century, after which the coarsening tendency which set in, followed

as it was by the French Revolution, caused it to fall into abeyance. It was then that the centre of the movement was transferred to England, a fact that was marked by the appearance of Mary Wollstonecraft's book already mentioned. From that time onwards, England, soon followed by America, took the lead.

No comprehensive view of the history of this movement is therefore possible if due consideration is not given to the feminist writers of the seventeenth century in France. Many of these pioneers of new ideas appealed to a very restricted circle of readers in their own lifetime, and are quite unknown to-day. Their literary merit was not great; their works have long been out of print, and their names are forgotten. They are brought into view once more in these pages because their ideas, often quaintly enough expressed, are interesting, not only in themselves, but also on account of their bearing upon the origin of a movement which is occupying the attention of all thinking people at the present day.

INTRODUCTION.

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THE following pages contain some account of certain more or less obscure feminist writers of the XVIIth century, and of François Poulain de la Barre in particular.

In addition to the study of their works it is the purpose of this treatise to show how far the movement which they represent was due to the influence of the *Précieuses*, and how far it was independent of the latter; to indicate the extent to which these writers were indebted to one another, especially as regards the relation of Poulain to his predecessors and successors; to differentiate the various types of feminist writers among those studied.

Thus viewed, these writers fall into three groups :
(1) The serious advocates of woman's emancipation.
(2) The *Savante*, who is actuated chiefly by intellectual vanity. (3) The writers of the *précieux* type who made the subject "une pure matière de galanterie ou d'amour."

In all of them the influence of the *Précieuses* is at least indirectly manifest; it is indeed to the *Précieuses* that the feminist movement, to which these works are due, is traceable. The more serious writers, such as Poulain, stand apart from the rest, however, inasmuch as they go further than their prototypes, and, indeed, look upon them and their later development, the *Savantes*, with disapproval and even contempt. Their labours might have been more fruitful if they had not been confused in the public mind with these ladies whose extravagance and affectation had brought about a revulsion of feeling which was prejudicial to all feministic reform.

CHAPTER I.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE XVIIIth CENTURY.

FROM certain points of view the XVIIIth century stands out from the social and literary history of France as that which, above all others, is imbued with feministic tendencies and characteristics. The mere mention of this brilliant period brings to mind the famous Hôtel de Rambouillet, the *Salons*, and the *Précieuses*, with the names of many women who were celebrated for their wit and learning. Then it was that women first came to associate with men in polite society on the footing of equality. Their influence made itself felt in a general refinement of manners and a standard of culture which had been impossible of attain-

ment during the civil wars of the reigns of Henry III. and Henry IV. Even after their close, the latter monarch was engaged in hostilities with Spain. Indeed, the rough manners and loose living of a King who had spent most of his life in camps were ill calculated to exert a refining influence upon the society of his time.

It is true that, under Marie de Médicis, the influence of Italy upon France, which had already made itself felt, was fostered and strengthened. To her was due the visit of Marino (1615) who introduced the affected style known in England as Euphuism. Anne of Austria was largely responsible for a similar influence exerted by Spain. Nevertheless, both at Court and among the members of the aristocracy, intellectual interests and refinement of manners were sadly lacking.

Catherine de Vivonne was the daughter of the Marquis de Pisani, who had been French

Ambassador to Spain and Rome. Her mother was an Italian. It is small wonder, then, that she should feel dissatisfied with the atmosphere of the French Court. As Marquise de Rambouillet she gathered together, at the celebrated Hôtel de Rambouillet, a social and literary coterie which was representative of the two influences mentioned above. The position occupied by women in these famous *réunions* marked a great advance upon the crude notions which had hitherto prevailed. Although, as we shall see later on, the movement was essentially aristocratic in its nature, and scarcely affected any but the highest class of society, yet, even in this restricted fashion, the recognition of women as the intellectual companions of men was little short of a social revolution. One result of this free intercourse was the spread of refinement and of a love of letters among men of rank. If women chiefly benefited by the changed conditions, it is

certain that their influence reacted no less advantageously upon the men.

Their impress has been left, too, upon the literature of the period. Not only had it become fashionable to write, but men wrote, largely, either about women or for them. It was, doubtless, in the *salons* that La Bruyère encountered many of the types that he immortalised in his "Caractères," that Pascal heard or uttered many an idea embodied in his "Pensées," that La Rochefoucauld gained many an inspiration for his "Maximes." Poets like Voiture were almost wholly under the influence of the *Précieuses*. They were, in the first instance, the public for whom he and many another poet wrote. The desire to please them, to express each thought in light attractive fashion, was not without its effect on literary form.

The conversations and discussions which took place at the various *salons*, though they

were somewhat of a dilettante nature, and seldom went below the surface of things, no doubt stimulated the general interest in literature and learning. In his description of the *Précieuses*, the Abbé de Pure¹ says “ L’object principal, et qui occupe tous leurs soins, c’est la recherche des bons mots et des expressions extraordinaires ; c’est à juger des beaux discours et des beaux ouvrages, pour conserver dans l’Empire des Conversations un juste tempérament entre le stile rampant et le pompeux. Elles se donnent encor charitablement la peine de censurer les mauvais vers, et de corriger les passables ; de travailler les dons de l’esprit, et les mettre si bien en oeuvre, qu’ils puissent arrêter les sens, élever le commerce de leurs plaisirs, et les rendre aussi spirituels que sensibles.”

The Salon also exerted its influence upon the

(¹) Abbé de Pure, *La Prétieuse ou le Mystère de la Ruelle*. Paris, 1656. Vol. I.

language itself. The *Précieuses*, to mark their superiority to the vulgar world—"le rude populaire"—invented a jargon of their own which Somaize has preserved for us in his "Dictionnaire des *Précieuses*." The extremes to which they went brought upon them well-merited ridicule. Somaize mentions such expressions as these: "J'ay un furieux tendre pour les gens d'esprit," "Vous m'encendrez et m'encapucinez le coeur," "Contentez, s'il vous plaît, l'envie que ce siège a de vous embrasser." Though such affectation met with the reception it deserved, yet *préciosité* of a milder type left its traces in many a writer of the day. Even Molière, whose sympathies were far from running in this direction, makes use of many a *Précieux* turn of speech in "Les Fâcheux," "Le Misanthrope," and "Tartuffe."

It is again Somaize¹ who tells us how three

(¹) Ed. Livet, I., p. 178

Précieuses—Roxalie (Mme. Le Roy), Silenie (Mlle. Saint-Maurice), and Didamie (Mlle. de la Durandière)—assisted by Claristine (M. Le Clerc), set about reforming French orthography. “Roxalie dit qu’il falloit faire en sorte que l’on pût écrire de mesme que l’on parloit.” Together they decided “ce qu’il falloit adjouster ou diminuer dans les mots pour en rendre l’usage plus facile et l’orthographe plus commode.” Thus *teste* was to become *tête* ; *authieur*, *auteur* ; *raisonne*, *resonne* ; *treize*, *tréze* ; *aage*, *âge*, etc. It will be seen that some of their reforms took effect.

The interest which the *Précieuses* took in linguistic matters is further illustrated by Voiture’s celebrated letter to Mlle. de Rambouillet concerning the word *car*. The reforms proposed by Mlle. de Gournay may also be mentioned, though, perhaps, she would be better described as a *Savante* than as a *Précieuse*.

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In spite of much exaggeration and affectation, the spirit which the *Précieuses* infused into their writings and into those of their admirers has rendered service in counteracting the exuberance of the *esprit gaulois*. If it runs riot in the jargon recorded by Somaïze, it plays gracefully in the madrigals of Voiture and the prose of Fléchier. "Le véritable esprit français," says Brunetière,¹ "tel que nos vraiment grands écrivains l'ont su représenter, s'est efforcé d'accommoder ensemble les justes libertés de l'esprit gaulois et les justes scrupules de l'esprit précieux."

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the movement associated with the salons and the *Précieuses* is the production of such women as Mlle de Scudéry and Mme de Sévigné; women whose learning and literary talent reached a standard far higher than that which had hitherto been attained by members of their

(¹) *Nouvelles Etudes Critiques*.

sex. It is not only as a writer of successful romances or as a brilliant conversationalist that Mlle de Scudéry merits the fame she has acquired. As we shall see later, she took a keen interest in the education of women, which was at that time in urgent need of improvement. Mme de Sévigné, too, in the numerous letters which have rightly placed her in the front rank among literary women, has left behind her observations of an extremely sane and intelligent nature upon the same subject.

Of a different type was the Marquise de Rambouillet, the founder and high-priestess of the cult which afterwards attracted so much ridicule. She wrote little, and has left no literary work ; her influence was mainly social, but she is a good example of the cultured woman of her day. “ Elle sait diverses langues,” says Mlle de Scudéry,¹ “ et n’ignore

(¹) *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus*. Paris, 1649-1653. Vol. VII.

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presque rien de ce qui mérite d'être su ; mais elle le sait sans faire semblant de le savoir, et on diroit, à l'entendre parler, tant elle est modeste, qu'elle ne parle de toutes choses admirablement, somme elle fait, que par le simple sens commun et par le seul usage du monde."

However, it may be argued that these women were not so much the product as the founders and inspirers of the movement with which their names are so intimately connected. It may well be that they would have distinguished themselves in any age and in any circumstances. They stand out pre-eminent among their disciples and imitators like pleasing oases in the midst of a desert of conceited affectation and banality.

Even during the most brilliant period of the Hôtel de Rambouillet this affectation was not entirely absent. It shews itself in the works of Voiture and others. The Marquise

herself exhibited an exaggerated delicacy in matters of language. "Elle est un peu trop délicate," says Tallemant des Réaux, "et le mot de teigneux dans une satire, ou dans une épigramme, lui donne, dit-elle, une vilaine idée. . . cela va dans l'excès, surtout quand on est en liberté." This delicacy was carried still further by her imitators and became a veritable cult. The same may be said of the substitution of Platonic affection for love, which grew to be an article of the *Précieuse* creed. In the early days we see signs of it in the prolonged engagement of Montausier and Julie d'Angennes, due entirely to the latter's aversion for marriage.

The *réunions* of the Hôtel de Rambouillet and of Mlle. de Scudéry gave rise to others, which copied their worst features, and thus came into being the typical *Précieux* and

(¹) *Les Historiettes*, 2e édition. Paris, 1861. Vol. III.

Précieuse. The terms arose somewhere about the middle of the century. "C'est un mot du temps," says the Abbé de Pure in his romance which appeared in 1656, "C'est un mot à la mode, qui a cours aujourd'hui comme autrefois celui de Prude, et depuis celui de Feuillantine."¹

In *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus*, Vol. X., Mlle. de Scudéry gives us a lively description of her would-be imitators. As an example we may take the portrait of Damophile (Mme. du Buisson), whom Somaize describes as "une précieuse qui voit grand monde," and who "parle fort bien la langue d'Hesperie." Among other things, Mlle de Scudéry remarks, "Au reste, Damophile, ne croyant pas que le savoir pût compatir avec les affaires de sa famille, ne se mêloit d'aucuns soins domestiques : mais pour Sapho, elle se donnoit la

(¹) *La Précieuse ou le Mystère de la Ruelle*. Paris, 1656.

peine de s'informer de tout ce qui étoit nécessaire pour savoir commander à propos jusques aux moindres choses." Damophile talks of nothing but books, and always in a stilted bookish style, which leads the author to observe that " Comme il n'y a rien de plus aimable ni de plus charmant qu'une femme qui s'est donné la peine d'orner son esprit de mille agréables connoissances quand elle en sait bien user, il n'y a rien aussi de si ridicule et de si ennuyeux qu'une femme sottement savante."

Saint-Évremond, in *Le Cercle* (1656), shows us the *Précieuse* " occupée aux leçons de morale amoureuse." The favourite subject of discussion is love, love from the *Précieux* point of view. " Des premiers maux d'amour on connaît la naissance. On a de leurs progrès une entière science." He quotes the definition of the *Précieuses* as " les jansénistes de l'amour," a definition which pleased the

Queen of Sweden, and adds : " L'amour est encore un Dieu pour les précieuses. Il n'excite pas de passion en leurs âmes : il y forme une espèce de religion. Mais à parler moins mystérieusement, le corps des précieuses n'est autre chose que l'union d'un petit nombre de personnes, où quelquesunes, véritablement délicates, ont jeté les autres dans une affectation de délicatesse ridicule."

In *La Vraie Histoire comique de Francion*,¹ by Charles Sorel, we have an amusing account of a visit paid to a *Précieuse*. Luce enjoyed a great reputation for wit and learning, and was, Francion was assured, surrounded by "les plus beaux esprits du monde." Francion, however, found the visit disappointing. "Je prêtai l'oreille," he says, "pour ouïr les bons discours que je m'imaginois qu'ils feroient. De tous côtés je n'entendis rien que des

(¹) Nouvelle édition par E. Colombey. Paris, 1858, pp. 225-227.

vanteries, des fadaïses et des contes faits mal à propos, avec un langage le plus galimatias et une prononciation la plus mauvaise que l'on se puisse figurer." After listening for a short time to the conversation, which is vividly reproduced, our hero felt he could stand it no longer. "J'étois si las de leurs simagrées, et d'entendre leurs niaiseries, que j'eusse donné tout ce que l'on eût voulu pour être dehors." At the first opportunity he slipped out unobserved.

The *précieuses de province* come in for their share of ridicule in the *Voyage de Chapelle et de Bachaumont*.¹ At Montpellier we are introduced to "un grand nombre de dames, qu'on nous dit être les plus jolies, les plus qualifiées et les plus spirituelles de la ville, quoique pourtant elles ne fussent ni trop belles, ni trop bien mises. A leurs petites mignardises, leur parler gras et leurs discours

(¹) Paris, 1874, pp. 43-46.

extraordinaires, nous crûmes plutôt que c'étoit une assemblée des précieuses de Montpellier ; mais, bien qu'elles fissent de nouveaux efforts à cause de nous, elles ne paroissent que des précieuses de campagne, et n'imitoient que foiblement les nôtres de Paris."

Such instances might be multiplied, but it was from Molière that came the crushing ridicule which immortalised the pretentious folly of the *Précieuses*. In 1693 Boileau could write,

" Mais qui vient sur ses pas ? C'est une précieuse,
 Reste de ces esprits jadis si renommés
 Que d'un coup de son art Molière a diffamés." (1)

Les Précieuses Ridicules appeared in 1659, *Les Femmes Savantes* in 1672 ; both are too well known to call for description here. It may be pointed out, however, that a comparison of the character of Cathos in the earlier

(1) Satire X.

play with that of Philaminte in the later one marks the development of the *esprit précieux* during this interval.

It was formerly taken for granted that the Hôtel de Rambouillet and its frequenters were the objects of Molière's *Satire*. Roederer,¹ however, endeavoured to shew that it was not the Marquise but her *bourgeois* imitators in Mlle de Scudéry's circle that he had in mind. Victor Cousin thinks that he referred to the imitators of Mlle de Scudéry, while the editor of *Molière* in *Les Grands Ecrivains de la France* (M. Despois) would include both the Hôtel de Rambouillet and Mlle de Scudéry, and considers that Molière aimed at no particular persons, but intended to ridicule the eccentricities common to the *Précieuses* in général. This last seems to be the most likely view. In this connection it

(¹) *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire de la société polie en France*. Paris, 1835.

may be noted that Vadius and Trissotin, the two pedants held up to ridicule in the *Femmes Savantes*, represent, respectively, Ménage and Cotin, who were frequenters of the Hôtel de Rambouillet. It is said that Molière at first used the name Tricotin. It was from Cotin's *Oeuvres Galantes* that Molière took literally—merely changing the dedication—the famous sonnet on the fever of Princess Urania and the madrigal on *Un carrosse de couleur amarante* in the *Femmes Savantes*.

There can be little doubt that, from the first, the learned and literary ladies who frequented the Hôtel de Rambouillet created a certain amount of aversion in the minds of a considerable class of people. Towards the middle of the century, when the *Précieuses* had developed marked characteristics and were looked upon as constituting a sect, this feeling of aversion was intensified and became much more widespread. Later on, public

opinion was pretty generally opposed to them and viewed them with a mixture of ridicule and contempt. In *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus*, which appeared in 1648, Mlle de Scudéry acquaints us with some of the opposition which she (Sapho) encountered, largely from members of her own sex. “ Je trouvai que les plus raisonnables de tous ceux qui fuyoient Sapho et ses amies étoient de ces jeunes gens gais et étourdis qui se vantent de ne savoir pas lire, et qui font vanité d’une espèce d’ignorance guerrière qui leur donne l’audace de juger de ce qu’ils ne connoissent pas, et qui leur persuade que les gens qui ont de l’esprit ne disent que des choses qu’ils n’entendent point.” There were also women “ qui fuyoient Sapho et ses amies et en faisoient des railleries à leur mode. Il est vrai que c’étoient de ces femmes qui pensent qu’elles ne doivent jamais rien savoir, sinon qu’elles sont belles, et qu’elles ne doivent jamais rien

apprendre qu'à bien se coiffer "

" Il y avoit aussi une autre espèce de femmes qui, pensant que la vertu scrupuleuse vouloit qu'une dame ne sût rien faire autre chose que d'être femme de son mari, mère de ses enfants et maîtresse de sa famille et de ses esclaves, trouvoient que Sapho et ses amies donnoient trop de temps à la conversation et qu'elles s'amusoient à parler de trop de choses qui n'étoient pas d'une nécessité absolue." Finally there were certain " gens d'esprit " who were only too ready to believe " que la société ou nous vivions étoit presque telle que tant de sottes gens la disoient."¹

She speaks in the same book of " la persécution inséparablement attachée à celles qui, comme moi, ont le malheur d'avoir la réputation de savoir quelque autre chose que faire des boucles et choisir des rubans " ; of women " qui font une profession si ouverte de haïr

(¹) *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus*, Vol. x., p. 584.

toutes les personnes qui ont de l'esprit, et qui affectent une ignorance grossière."¹

Among the *portraits* due to the pen of Mlle de Montpensier is one which, as she says, differs from most of its kind in being that, not of one person, but of "plusieurs qui vivent dans un même esprit et d'une même manière," of "une sorte de république," of the *Précieuses* in fact. It belongs to a collection which appeared in 1659, and may be taken as indicating the general feeling of the time. "Quelque inclination que les François aient pour les nouveautés," says Mademoiselle, "assurément cette secte ne sera point suivie puisqu'elle est généralement désapprouvée de tout le monde, et le sujet ordinaire de la raillerie de ceux qui ont l'autorité d'en faire impunément de qui il leur plaît."—"Il me seroit difficile de parler de leur beauté, car je n'étois pas en âge de discernement lorsque

(¹) Ibid, pp. 612-622.

celles à qui l'on en voit quelque reste l'étoient en perfection ; pour celles dont j'en pourrois maintenant juger, elles n'en ont aucune."—
 "Elles penchent la tête sur l'épaule, font des mines des yeux et de la bouche, ont une mine méprisante et une certaine affectation en tous leurs procédés qui est extrêmement déplaisante." Interesting details follow as to the behaviour of the *Précieuse* in society, according to which it must be admitted that her manners were exceedingly bad and her impertinence well nigh intolerable. "Elles ont quasi une langue particulière, car à moins que de les pratiquer, ou ne les entend pas. Elles trouvent à redire à tout ce que l'on fait et à tout ce que l'on dit, et désapprouvent généralement la conduite de tout le monde." "Pour la cour, elles y vont rarement, parce qu'elles n'y sont pas les bienvenues."¹

(¹) E. de Barthélemy, *La Galerie des Portraits de Mademoiselle de Montpensier*. Paris, 1860, pp. 515-519.

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We shall find confirmation of this unpopularity in the works of Poulain de la Barre and other feminist writers.

Indeed, the *Précieuses* were not actively feministic : they had no altruistic propaganda. The movement was essentially self-centred and of a literary and social nature. Women like Mlle de Scudéry and Mme de Maintenon, as we have seen, stand somewhat apart from the rest in this respect, but the educational reforms which they advocated were of the mildest type, and cannot be compared with the revolutionary doctrines of writers whose views we are later to consider. The chief object of the *réunions* which took place at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, at the *samedis* of Mlle de Scudéry and in the *salons* which were modelled upon these, was the cultivation of the art of conversation. A perusal of *Cyrus*, *Clélie* and Balzac's *Discours* gives us a good idea of their character. The following is a

good example of the topics chosen for discussion : " Ce que je vous demande en termes généraux est lequel vous croiriez le plus malheureux, ou celui qui ne verroit jamais la personne qu'il aimeroit, ayant la certitude d'en être aimé, et sachant que son rival la verroit continuellement, ou celui qui la verroit toujours en sa puissance sans jamais pouvoir toucher son coeur."¹ We have already referred to the Platonic view of love affected by the *Précieuses* and so admirably illustrated by Molière in the character of Armande.² We have also seen that this was not the only topic to be discussed, and that questions of literary style, and even orthographical reforms also claimed attention, but the education of women generally and their place and function in society are matters which did not concern the *Précieuses*, and formed no part of their

(¹) *Cyrus*, vii., p. 378.

(²) *Femmes Savantes*, iv., 2.

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conversation. Other favourite occupations, such as the composition of *bouts-rimés*, *madrigaux* and *portraits*, all point to the same conclusion.

The *Précieuse* easily developed into the *Savante*, but the underlying motive was the same in each case—that form of vanity which expressed itself in a passionate desire for admiration, eagerness to shine brilliantly in society and to be considered as superior to the general run of women. The *Précieuse* reigned as queen of an admiring and flattering literary coterie ; the *Savante* aimed at exciting the same adulation by a display of learning. Thus *Savantes* claimed intellectual equality with men, and writers of the *Précieux* type sang the praises of the fair sex and even maintained its superiority, “ par galanterie ou par amour.” The subject was treated by them as an “ exercice d’esprit.” None seriously contended that women should assume

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functions in society hitherto confined to men. Writers like Anna von Schurman, who pleaded for the intellectual emancipation of women, or Mlle. de Gournay, who went further and advocated the complete equality of the sexes, had little of the *Précieuse* about them.

Further, whatever views the *Précieuses* may have had with regard to their position in the world's economy, their interests were far too restricted, their atmosphere too select and aristocratic to allow them to manifest concern for the welfare of their sex as a whole. The polite society which alone was admitted to their circle they characterised as "les honnêtes gens"; all others were included in "le rude populaire." It has been contended that Mlle de Scudéry's *samedis* were more *bourgeois* in character than the gatherings at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, but, as a matter of fact, the same society met there, though there were fewer representatives of the great

nobility. Montausier was a constant visitor when in Paris, and many other ladies and gentlemen of rank who had attended the *réunions* of the Hôtel de Rambouillet also frequented those of Mlle de Scudéry. In the middle-class *salons* which sprang up in imitation of their more aristocratic prototypes, the habitués affected the occupations and manners of the earlier *Précieux* and *Précieuses*, and indeed made themselves ridiculous by their social pretensions. Molière has left us finished portraits of this type of *Précieuse* in the personages of Madelon and Cathos. In so far, then, as the influence of the *Précieuse* is to be taken seriously, it was essentially exclusive and aristocratic.

The general level of women's education was exceedingly low. Whether it was bestowed at home or in some religious establishment like Port Royal, it was of the most restricted kind, and was still imbued with the mediæval

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spirit which regarded women as fitted only for a life of almost conventual seclusion. The idea that a woman should be the intellectual companion of her husband and the teacher of her children was looked upon as new and daring even in the XVIIth century, though undoubtedly public opinion had advanced considerably since the days when Montaigne could congratulate himself on being blessed with a good wife who had needed but few whippings. Chrysale, no doubt, expresses the general opinion of the day in the *Femmes Savantes* (II., 7).

“Il n'est pas bien honnête, et pour beaucoup de
causes,

Qu'une femme étudie, et sache tant de choses.

Former aux bonnes moeurs l'esprit de ses enfants,

Faire aller son ménage, avoir l'oeil sur les gens,

Et régler la dépense avec économie,

Doit être son étude et sa philosophie.”

We have seen how much opposition was excited by Mlle de Scudéry's intellectual at-

tainments, although they were apparently accompanied by becoming modesty, as we shall presently have occasion to shew.¹ To overstep the narrow limits described by Chrysale was to be dubbed a *femme savante*, an expression then used in a disparaging sense.

In the description of herself, given by Mlle de Scudéry in the *Cyrus*, we read : “ Elle sait de plus jouer de la lyre et chanter ; elle danse aussi de fort bonne grâce, et elle a même voulu savoir faire tous les ouvrages où les femmes qui n’ont pas l’esprit aussi élevé qu’elle s’occupent quelquefois pour se divertir. Mais ce qu’il y a d’admirable, c’est que cette personne, qui sait tant de choses différentes, les sait sans faire la savante, sans en avoir aucun orgueil, et sans mépriser celles qui ne les savent pas.” The fact that her modesty and moderation did not render her immune from taunts and criticism is an index to

(¹) See above, p. 19.

public opinion on the subject of women's education.

Her own views on the matter are reasonable enough. "Il faut que j'avoue," she says, "qu'encore que je sois ennemie déclarée de toutes les femmes qui font les savantes, je ne laisse pas de trouver l'autre extrémité fort condamnable, et d'être souvent épouvantée de voir tant de femmes de qualité avec une ignorance si grossière que, selon moi, elles déshonorent notre sexe."¹ She proceeds to criticise the way in which women are brought up to think "qu'une femme n'est point obligée de rien apprendre." If that is so, she adds, it were better not to teach her to write and to forbid her to speak, for if she is to write and speak she should not be deprived of those things "qui peuvent lui éclairer l'esprit, lui former le jugement et lui apprendre à bien parler et à bien écrire." Women are expected

(1) *Cyrus*. Vol. x., pp. 664-675.

to be neither “coquettes ou galantes,” yet they are permitted to learn all that which is “propre à la galanterie,” while they are deprived of all that would fortify their virtue and healthily occupy their mind. She would have it said of a woman “qu’elle sait cent choses dont elle ne se vante pas, qu’elle a l’esprit fort éclairé, qu’elle connoît finement les beaux ouvrages, qu’elle parle bien, qu’elle écrit juste, et qu’elle sait le monde,” but not that she is “une femme savante.” “Il y a certaines sciences que les femmes ne doivent jamais apprendre—il y en a d’autres qu’elles peuvent savoir, mais qu’elles ne doivent pourtant jamais avouer qu’elles sachent, quoiqu’elles puissent souffrir qu’on le devine.” A woman may study languages : read Homer and Hesiod. She can even give her opinion of these writers in a manner so modest and unassertive as not to shock “la bienséance de son sexe.” On the other hand she should not

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develop into a bookworm. “ Je veux qu’elle ne lise que pour apprendre à bien parler.”

It is, naturally, to Molière that we turn for a picture of things as they actually were in his time, and more especially, perhaps, of the excesses which called for ridicule from his pen. It would not be fair to identify his own views with those of any single character in his comedies. He was first and foremost an artist, not a moralist, and his plays were intended primarily to amuse. They give us vivid glimpses of life as he saw it, but, though many of the comedies provide him with the means of castigating the vices and follies of his compatriots, yet they cannot be considered as pieces “ à thèse.” Because, in the *Précieuses Ridicules*, he amuses his audience by representing the foolish affectation of these ladies in the persons of Madelon and Cathos, we are not thereby justified in saddling him with the opinions of Gorgibus. It is evident,

however, that he had little sympathy with the *Précieuses* of the period which lies between the production of the *Précieuses Ridicules* (1659) and the *Femmes Savantes* (1672). Cathos, Madelon, Chimène, Arsinoé, Belise, Philaminte, are all equally ridiculous.

The question of women's education forms the theme of the *Ecole des Maris* and the *Ecole des Femmes*. In the former play, Sganarelle, speaking of a wife's duties, wishes that :

“Enfermée au logis en personne bien sage
Elle s'applique toute aux choses du ménage,
A recoudre mon linge aux heures de loisir,
Ou bien à tricoter quelques bas par plaisir.”

Ariste opposes this extreme view. In reply to Sganarelle he says :—

“Leur sexe aime à jouir d'un peu de liberté;
On le retient fort mal par tant d'austérité,
C'est l'honneur qui les doit tenir dans le devoir
Non la sévérité que nous leur faisons voir.”

“ je tiens sans cesse
Qu'il nous faut en riant instruire la jeunesse,
Reprendre ses défauts avec grande douceur
Et du nom de vertu ne lui point faire peur.”

It is for this more humane view that Molière would evidently enlist our sympathy, and in doing so he indirectly criticises the exaggerated idea of parental authority then current.

In the *Ecole des Femmes* Arnolphe takes the standpoint of Sganarelle. His wife has no need of education :

“ Et c’est assez pour elle, à vous en bien parler,
De savoir prier Dieu, m’aimer, coudre et filer.”

His experiment with Agnes does not succeed, and Chrysale pertinently asks : “ Mais comment voulez-vous, après tout, qu’une bête puisse jamais savoir ce que c’est d’être honnête ? ”

Horace’s question puts the case still more strongly :

“ Et n’est-ce pas, sans doute, un crime punissable
De gâter méchamment ce fonds d’âme admirable,
D’avoir dans l’ignorance et la stupidité
Voulu de cet esprit étouffer la clarté ? ”

Here again, Arnolphe, and all that he stands for, is held up for condemnation, though his

exaggerated diatribes against the follies of the *Précieuses* are not devoid of a certain amount of truth, and are doubtless to some extent an echo of the author's sentiments. Molière's standpoint seems to lie between the views represented respectively by Agnes and Philaminte. On this as on other questions he represents the sober judgment of the moderate man who deprecates extremes in any direction.

Insensibly then, we are led to look on Molière's ideal as being embodied in the character of Henriette in *Les Femmes Savantes*, and his views on woman's education as being expressed by the words of Clitandre :

“ Je consens qu'une femme ait des clartés de tout,
 Mais je ne lui veux point la passion choquante
 De se rendre savante afin d'être savante.
 Et j'aime que souvent aux questions qu'on fait
 Elle sache ignorer les choses qu'elle sait :
 De son étude enfin je veux qu'elle se cache,
 Et qu'elle ait du savoir sans vouloir qu'on le sache,
 Sans citer les auteurs, sans dire de grands mots
 Et clouer de l'esprit à ses moindres propos.”

La Bruyère fully shares Molière's dislike of *préciosité*, but further manifests in his *Caractères* an outspoken mistrust of women in general. The customary ignorance of women is, according to him, the result of their natural idleness and weakness. "On regarde une femme savante," he says, "comme on fait une belle arme, elle est ciselée artistement, d'une polissure admirable et d'un travail fort recherché, c'est une pièce de cabinet que l'on montre aux curieux, qui n'est pas d'usage, qui ne sert ni à la guerre ni à la chasse, non plus qu'un cheval de manège quoique le mieux instruit du monde."

The art of letter-writing, however, he considers to belong to woman's sphere. "Il n'appartient qu'à elles de faire lire dans un seul mot tout un sentiment et de rendre délicatement une pensée qui est délicate—si les femmes étaient toujours correctes, j'oserais dire que les lettres de quelquesunes d'entre

elles seraient peut-être ce que nous avons dans notre langue de mieux écrit.”¹

Among those who took a more practical interest in women’s education the names of Fénelon and Mme de Maintenon occupy a foremost place. In his treatise on *L’Education des Filles* the former traces what would now strike us as an extremely restricted course of study for that class of girls whom he had in mind—the daughters of the “petite noblesse” for whom Mme de Maintenon had just opened the *Maison Saint Cyr*. Beyond the arts of reading and writing, “Il faudrait aussi qu’une fille sût la grammaire—accoutumez-les seulement sans affectation à ne prendre point un temps pour un autre.” Women should observe “une pudeur sur la science presque aussi délicate que celle qui inspire l’horreur du vice.” Their studies

(¹) La Bruyère: *Des Jugements*, Fragment 28. *Caractères*.

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should be adapted to their duties ; Fénelon therefore lays great stress on domestic economy. He would have women occupied with household duties lest education should unduly exalt their imagination and their ambition. He dwells on the poetry of practical work and a simple life. Several chapters are devoted to religious education, especially with a view to fortifying them against the heresies of the Calvinists.

Yet in many respects, Fénelon is in advance of his time. He speaks of a woman's duties as "*les fondements de toute la vie humaine.*" That is why education should not be withheld from her. It is also her due inasmuch as she is a human being and a person. "*La vertu n'est pas moins pour les femmes que pour les hommes—elles sont la moitié du genre humain, rachetées du sang de Jésus Christ et destinées à la vie éternelle.*" "*L'ignorance d'une fille est la cause qu'elle s'ennuie et qu'elle ne sait*

à quoi s'occuper innocemment." "Les filles mal instruites et inappliquées ont une imagination toujours errante." In his *Avis à une dame de qualité* he deprecates a convent education for girls. The vanities of the world, he says, are more attractive at a distance. Forbidden fruit is always sweetest. Girls should be educated at home.

The education provided by Mme de Maintenon for her *protégées* at Saint Cyr was in full agreement with Fénelon's theories, though she started at first with a wider ideal. The scandal caused by the representation of Racine's tragedies and the worldly tone which had invaded the institution led her to modify this considerably. To her teachers she writes : "Vous ne les élevez pas pour plaire au monde ; c'est pour en faire de bonnes chrétiennes, des filles sages et raisonnables." "Faites taire leur esprit et animez leur coeur." "Les femmes ne savent qu'à demi et le peu qu'elles

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savent les rend communément fières, dédaigneuses et dégoûtées des choses solides.”

Though these ideas strike us as narrow, yet Mme de Maintenon did good service in her day by emphasising the truth that the most important part of education is that which is concerned with the development of character, and by insisting that her girls should be so trained as to grow up simple, unaffected and natural.

From this short sketch it is clear that the XVIIth century was marked by an awakened interest in the question of women's education. The reign of the *Précieuses* had undoubtedly raised the ideal of the intellectual value of women, and consequently of the type of education best suited for them. Their extravagance and infatuation, however, produced a reaction which allied itself to the habitual indifference which stands in the way of such reforms, or, perhaps, greater progress would

have been made. We have seen how reformers like Fénelon and Mme de Maintenon were imbued with a mistrust of women's nature. If they agreed that a certain amount of enlightenment was necessary to enable woman to understand and practise virtue and to keep her out of mischief, at the same time they feared that too much education might have disastrous results. "Qu'il périlite ou qu'il soit florissant, l'enseignement féminin s'inspire de la même idée et s'applique avec prédilection au même but : la méfiance de la nature féminine, la préoccupation de la prémunir contre les entraînements, de tenir toujours les jeunes filles occupées, à la fois pour les protéger contre les tentations de l'oisiveté et pour les préparer à gagner leur vie et à tenir leur intérieur."¹

(¹) *La Femme et la Société française dans la première moitié du dix-septième siècle.* G. Faguiez. *Revue des deux mondes*, 1909, p. 342.

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But apart from the *Précieuses*, who, as we have seen, were too deeply immersed in their own peculiar occupations and too exclusively aristocratic in their aspirations to interest themselves deeply in the question of women's education ; apart from the *Savantes* who studied in order that they might display their learning ; apart also from educational reformers of a discreet type like Fénelon and Mme de Maintenon, were certain writers who seriously claimed for women the same educational advantages, and even the same opportunities of activity, the same place in society, as men. They had no leanings towards *préciosité* and little sympathy with the professed *Savantes*. Among these, Poulain de la Barre, whose first book has been described as “*dégagé de tout préjugé*,”¹ may be considered as the most deserving of study. An examination of his three works, and a com-

(¹) Petit de Julleville, tom. 5, pp. 443 et seq.

parison of his ideas with those of other contemporary writers, may not be without value in adding, in however small a degree, to our knowledge of the state of woman's education and of her position in society in the XVIIth century, of the attitude of the *Précieuses* and *Savantes* towards these questions, of the esteem in which these two sects were held by the general public, and finally, of the ideas of this little group of feminists who, though naturally possessing many features in common with the *Savante* and the *Précieuse*, must yet be considered as distinct from both.

CHAPTER II.

FRANÇOIS POULAIN DE LA BARRE.

HIS LIFE AND WORK.

FRANÇOIS POULAIN DE LA BARRE was born at Paris in 1647. According to Senebier,¹ "Il étudia la philosophie cartésienne par goût et la théologie par intérêt." His devotion to the former is sufficiently manifest in his book *De l'Education des Dames*, where the Cartesian Philosophy occupies a prominent place in the curriculum which he recommends for the education of women. The second part of Senebier's statement is probably true also, at anyrate if we understand *theology* in the sense

(¹) *Histoire Littéraire de Genève*, par Jean Senebier. Genève, 1786, tom. ii., pp. 282-283.

given to it by the Church of Rome. Poulain's tastes were undoubtedly philosophical and literary, as is shown by the subject matter of his books, but that he did not entirely lose interest in theological questions, even after his secession, is clear from his work on *La Doctrine des Protestants sur la liberté et le droit de lire l'Ecriture Sainte*, published at Geneva, 1720, which Senebier describes as "un des meilleurs ouvrages de controverse qu'il y ait."

Having taken orders, Poulain directed his ambition towards the coveted title of *Docteur de Sorbonne*, which he duly obtained together with the living of Flamangrie in the diocese of Laon. "La lecture réfléchie de l'Ecriture Sainte," says Senebier, "fit sentir à De La Barre les erreurs de l'église romaine," or, as the *Biographie Universelle*¹ puts it, "Des

(¹) *Biographie Universelle, Ancienne et Moderne*, publiée sous la direction de M. Michand. Paris, 1843.

chagrins que lui avait attirés la liberté avec laquelle il s'exprimait sur des choses que son état lui faisait un devoir de respecter le déterminèrent à quitter sa patrie et à renoncer à sa religion." He accordingly gave up his living in 1688 and retired to Paris. He afterwards proceeded to Geneva, where he married and settled down in 1690. "Les connoissances de philosophie et de belles-lettres furent un trésor qui lui devint nécessaire pour vivre." (Senebier.) At first he gave lessons in philosophy and *Belles-lettres*: later on, doubtless, the proceeds of his books contributed to provide a living for himself and his family.

He evidently became well known, and was much respected at Geneva, for in 1708 he was made *Régent de Seconde*, while the title of *Bourgeois* was gratuitously conferred upon him, in consideration of his intellectual attainments, his good conduct and his long services as *régent*, in 1716. The entry in the

registers of the *Conseil d'Etat de la République de Genève* is as follows :—

“ 1716. 18 mai. Le Sr. Fr. Poulain de la Barre est reçu Bs. gratis, en considération de ses lumières, de sa bonne conduite et de ses longs services en qualité de régent de 2de., et le Sr. Jn. Jaqs. Poulain de la Barre son fils natif est reçu Bs. pour 1500 fl.”¹

His son Jean Jacques, here mentioned, became a Protestant minister, and seems to have followed worthily in his father's footsteps, for, later on, we find the following entry in the registers :—

“ 1751. 9 mars. Les députés de la V.C. ont rendu justice aux talens distingués de feu Sp. Jn. Jaqs. de la Barre, Pasteur de Bossey, à sa piété, à sa grande connoissance

(¹) *Fragmens biographiques et historiques extraits des registres du conseil d'Etat de la République de Genève, dès 1535 à 1792, par Le Baron F. T. L. Grenus-Saladin.* Genève, 1815.

dans les affaires et aux services essentiels qu'il a rendus."

Poulain himself died, according to Senebier, in 1723.¹ The following is a list of his works :

- (1) *De l'Egalité des deux Sexes*. Discours physique et moral où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des Préjugés. A Paris, chez Iban Du Puis, rue Saint-Jacques à la Couronne-d'or. MDCLXXIII. Avec Privilège du Roy. 12^{mo}. Other editions appeared in 1676 and 1692. (British Museum 8416, a. 58.)
- (2) *De l'Education des Dames*, pour la conduite de l'Esprit dans les Sciences et dans les Mœurs—Entretiens. A Paris, chez Jean du Puis, rue S. Jacques, à la Couronne d'or. MDCLXXIV. Avec Permission. 8^{vo}. (Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, S. A. 2886 bis.)

(¹) The *Biographie Universelle* puts it at 1725, but this is probably an error.

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- (3) *De l'Excellence des hommes contre l'égalité des Sexes.* A Paris, chez Jean du Puis, rue S. Jacques, à la Couronne d'or. MDCLXXV. Avec privilège du Roy. (British Museum, 8403, bb. 11.)
- (4) *Le Rapport de la langue latine avec la langue française.* This book is mentioned by Senebier, but no date is given. In the *Biographie Universelle* it is quoted as "Les rapports de la langue latine à la française pour traduire élégamment." Paris, 1672, in-12. I have been unable to trace a copy in London, Paris or Geneva. It is possible that it is to this work that Poulain refers, in his *Education des Dames*, when he says: "Si le livre des fondemens de la langue française dont Sophie nous a parlé estoit imprimé, ce seroit un ouvrage à lire d'abord pour y apprendre les véritables principes de la Grammaire, avec la signification de

presque tous les mots françois qui sont en usage. Vous pouvez en attendant vous servir de la Grammaire raisonnée.” (*De l’Education des Dames*, Quatrième Entretien.) If that be so, then its date must be later than 1674.

- (5) Senebier mentions a book entitled *Catalogue des mauvais termes communs au Peuple de Genève*, with reference to which the writer in the *Biographie Universelle* remarks, “Senebier lui attribue encore le *Catalogue des mauvais termes communs au Peuple de Genève*, titre d’après lequel on peut juger que l’auteur ne possédait pas assez bien les finesses de sa langue pour pouvoir en donner des leçons.” I have failed to trace this book under the title given by Senebier, but conclude that it must be identical with the *Essai des remarques particulières sur la langue françoise pour la Ville de Genève* (1691), of

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which there is a copy in the University Library at Geneva.

- (6) *La Doctrine des Protestants sur la liberté de lire l'Ecriture Sainte, le service divin en langue entendue, etc.—justifiée par le Missel Romain, etc.* Genève, 1720. 12°. (British Museum, 3902, bb. 44.)

Of the different subjects treated by Poulain—theology, language, and the equality of the sexes—it is with the last alone that we are concerned. We shall therefore proceed to examine the first three of the six books mentioned above.

In his introduction to *De l'Egalité des deux Sexes* Poulain takes great pains to assure his readers that he is in earnest, and that he has nothing in common with those writers who extol the fair sex merely “par galanterie ou par amour.” He fears lest the mistaken notion “que ce seroit un ouvrage de galanterie ne le fasse passer légèrement, ou regretter par

les personnes scrupuleuses.” His concern is natural enough, for such “ouvrages de galanterie” were not uncommon in the latter half of the seventeenth century.¹ His assurances, however, do not seem to have won him the fair hearing which he desired. In his subsequent treatise he tells us: “Je me souviens encore fort bien que lorsque le livre de l’égalité commença à paroître il n’y eut que les Précieuses qui le reçurent avec applaudissement, disant qu’on leur faisoit quelque justice ; d’autres le firent valoir seulement parce qu’il flattoit leur vanité ; mais tout le reste en parla comme d’un paradoxe qui avoit plus de galanterie que de vérité, n’osant pas le condamner tout à fait, parce qu’il leur étoit

(¹) E. G.:—*Les Entretiens de Théandre et d’Isménie sur l’ancien et fameux Différend de la Prééminence de Sexe entre l’Homme et la Femme*. Decrues, Paris, 2nd ed. 1689. *Les Avantages du Sexe ou le Triomphe des Femmes*, etc. C. M. D. Noel, Paris, 1698. *Conversations sur l’excellence du Beau Sexe*. G. de Vertron, 2 vols., Paris, 1699.

favorable."¹ In his *Education des Dames* (1674) he returns to this subject. Timandre had taken for granted that the *Egalité* had been written merely as an "exercice d'esprit," but Poulain protests that he had stated his views with complete sincerity, and adds: "Je suis en cela d'une humeur fort opposée à la plupart des hommes." It is necessary to bear these assurances in mind, for Poulain's work is in danger of similar misinterpretation to-day, partly on account of the extreme nature of his views, and partly because, in his *De l'Excellence des Hommes*, he has stated the case of his opponents so elaborately as to mislead the casual reader.²

(1) *De l'Excellence des Hommes*, 1675.

(2) Thus, *Frauenbildung im 17. Jahrhundert in Frankreich nach den Briefen von Mme de Sévigné*, by Christine Hansen, Kopenhagen, 1910, p. 18.—"Jedenfalls sind die Ausführungen einer späteren Schrift dem Discours de l'Egalité gerade entgegengesetzt. Sie weist der Frau auf allen Gebieten eine untergeordnete Stellung an."

OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

In his first book he sets out to combat the commonly accepted view of women's intellectual inferiority and to establish the thesis : " Que les femmes sont aussi nobles, aussi parfaites et aussi capables que les hommes." He has two classes of opponents : " le vulgaire, et presque tous les sçavans."

Women's apparent inferiority to men is due to their defective education. This must be changed. They must be saved " de l'oisiveté où elles sont réduites et des inconvénients qui la suivent." Since other forms of activity are withheld from them they should be interested in study " qui est presque la seule chose à quoy les Dames puissent à présent s'occuper." To this end we must convince them " qu'elles y sont aussi propres que les hommes."

The present view, " qu'elles ne sont faites que pour nous, et qu'elles ne sont guère propres qu'à élever les enfants dans leur bas

âge, et à prendre le soin du ménage," is a relic of barbarous times when "la loy du plus fort" was supreme.

Men's jealousy has also contributed to keep women in a state of subjection. The clumsy erudition of the *Savant* will not stand comparison with woman's rapid intuition and her unwillingness to hide ignorance beneath the cloak of imposing but meaningless phrases. Brilliant examples shew us to what heights women can attain when once they burst their bonds.

Vulgar prejudice is fostered by the learned. Writers, ancient and modern, belittle women on account of their ignorance, which, after all, is due to men. The laws press unfairly on the weaker sex. They were made by men for men. 1

(1) Cf. Montaigne: "Les femmes n'ont pas tort du tout, quand elles refusent les règles de vie qui sont introduictes au monde; d'autant que ce sont les hommes qui les ont faictes sans elles." *Essais*, livre iii. ch. v.

OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

Sex, Poulain contends, is a physical attribute, and has no effect on the mind. Brains have no sex. This theory is frequently met with in feminist writers of the day. It is a stock argument, advanced by serious and flippant authors alike, in support of the equality of the sexes.

It follows that there are no studies beyond woman's capacity. Poulain examines at great length a long list of those in which she might advantageously engage. In the course of his remarks he says that he would like to see her "travailler en Académicienne à la perfection de sa langue naturelle, réformant ou retranchant les mauvais mots, en introduisant de nouveaux, réglant l'usage sur la raison et sur les idées justes qu'on a des langues." The *Précieuses*, as we have seen, had anticipated him in this respect.¹

From the different branches of study to the

(¹) See above, pp. 6-7.

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various professions exercised by men is but a step, and our author boldly proclaims that “*Les femmes ne sont moins capables que les hommes des emplois de la Société.*” Especially would he have the universities open their doors to them. “*Leur génie qui les dispose si avantageusement à apprendre, les disposeroit aussi à enseigner avec succès.*” But why stop there ? What is to prevent women from fulfilling the duties of ministers of religion, of officers of State ? “*Pour moi je ne serois pas plus surpris de voir une femme le casque en teste, que de lui voir une couronne.*”

From these heights he descends once more to urge that plea which forms the guiding principle of moderate reformers like Fénelon—the danger of idleness for the feminine mind. Study would protect women “*de l’erreur et de la surprise, à quoi sont si exposées les personnes qui n’apprennent rien que par la*

voye des Gazettes, c'est à dire, par le simple rapport d'autrui." The *Cercle* and the *Gazette* make great claims upon the abundant leisure of the better class women of Poulain's day, and both incur his condemnation. While their poorer sisters are too busily engaged in earning their living to have time for education, the richer women are wholly given up to idleness and frivolity. Is it any wonder that certain failings manifest themselves as the result of these conditions ?

Poulain examines a great number of what are commonly considered to be the characteristic defects of women and disposes of them all in one of two ways : either they are not peculiar to women, but are equally noticeable in men, or they are due to women's defective education.

Reference is made to the Ancients, whose remarks on women are not to be taken too seriously, and the treatise ends with the final

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statement of Poulain's view : " On prétend icy qu'il y a une égalité entière entre les deux sexes."

Although, as we have seen, the *Egalité des deux Sexes* pleased few, yet it did not provoke any of its opponents to venture upon a reply. " Je m'étonne," says Poulain in the preface to his *Excellence des Hommes*, " qu'après tant de menaces d'écrire contre l'Egalité des Sexes, aucun ne l'ait fait encore, au moins pour répondre à l'attente que ces menaces avoient donnée." This being the case, he determined to represent the other side himself in order to " comparer les deux sentiments opposés et de mieux juger lequel est le plus vrai en voyant séparément dans tout leur jour les raisons sur lesquelles ils sont fondez." Poulain's imaginary opponent proves to be a mere " man of straw " whom he sets up for the pleasure of knocking him down. " Pour ce qui est de l'*Excellence des Hommes*," he says,

“ il le faut lire comme s’il venoit d’une main inconnue et zélée pour la gloire de notre sexe, afin de mieux reconnoistre si l’Auteur ne s’est point flatté luy-mesme en affoiblissant les preuves de ses Adversaires ; et s’il dit contre les femmes tout le mal que l’on en peut dire publiquement.” He flatters himself that he has put the case of his opponents better than they are wont to do themselves, their usual methods of criticism consisting mainly of invective, generalisations from the faults of individuals, and censure of what is merely the effect of custom or defective education.

The opposing thesis to be maintained is “ Que l’opinion commune, que les femmes ne sont point égales aux hommes, ne doit point passer pour une erreur de préjugé, et qu’estant aussi ancienne et aussi étendue que le monde et conforme aux principes de la saine philosophie, elle doit demeurer comme une vérité constante.”

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The writer contends that the universality of this belief is the best proof of its truth. It is upheld by the Scriptures : it dates from the dawn of civilization. Women have always accepted it without question, without revolt. It is not a matter of man's tyranny, or even of custom, but of natural law.

Women are physically equal to men only inasmuch as they are as well adapted to the end which nature has in view for them. This equality " n'est pas une égalité géométrique, comme celle qui se trouve entre deux cercles de pareille grandeur. C'est une égalité proportionnelle, qui répond à celle de deux cercles inégaux en grandeur et égaux en nombre de parties."

There follows the famous temperament theory, in accordance with which the mind is influenced by the bodily constitution. Men's " constitution chaude et sèche " favours the development of intellect and virtue " parce

que la chaleur produit nécessairement la force," etc. With women the exact opposite is the case. This method of attributing to mind the properties of matter is a favourite form of argument in the seventeenth century. It is to Poulain's credit that he treats this pseudo-scientific jargon with the contempt which it deserves. In the *Egalité* he says, " Il y a des médecins, qui se sont fort étendus sur le tempérament des sexes au désavantage des femmes," and adds that it would be unnecessary to mention so foolish a doctrine " si un Auteur autant célèbre que poly ne s'étoit avisé de la considérer comme la source des défauts qu'on leur attribue vulgairement." This author, he further informs us, was a certain M. de la Chambre. We meet this curious theory repeatedly in later works on the respective merits of the sexes. A slight difference in its application enables the writer in each case to use it on behalf of the sex whose

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cause he happens to be defending. We have seen that Poulain goes to the other extreme and regards sex as a purely physical distinction which has no bearing upon mental characteristics. The temperament theory forms one of the principal arguments in *l'Excellence des Hommes*. By its aid the writer assigns various good qualities to men ; these qualities beget others, and so on through a whole genealogy of virtues which belong peculiarly to man by virtue of his fortunate possession of "une constitution chaude et sèche." The "Humidité" which is responsible for women's beauty brings in its train a host of weaknesses and failings which distinguish the fair sex, and render its members unfitted for any duties other than the bringing forth and rearing of children. Exceptions do but prove the rule. Women are the first to recognise this.

The second part of the book deals with the

verdict of the Bible, which the writer holds to be the final court of appeal. According to him, "selon l'Ecriture Sainte, les femmes ne sont point égales aux hommes." There follow abundant quotations which, it must be admitted, are by no means flattering to the sex. The majority are taken from the book of Ecclesiasticus which is, indeed, a veritable armoury of anti-feministic weapons, and is constantly drawn upon by anti-feminist writers of the period. It is amusing to note the struggle between Poulain's orthodoxy and his feministic ideals when he comes to answer these arguments.

Among these biblical quotations the following calls for special notice: "L'iniquité de l'homme vient de la femme comme le ver de l'habit. C'est pourquoi l'iniquité d'un homme est préférable aux bien-faits d'une femme" (Eccles. xlii., 12-14), which is followed by the naive comment: "Je demande ce que

l'on doit penser des personnes dont le saint Esprit prend un si grand soin de nous éloigner.” In his answer, Poulain points out that the last verse is here, as often, incorrectly quoted, the words “ et qui cause de la confusion et de l’opprobre ” being omitted.¹ It forms the text of the *Sermon Apologétique*² by Louis Machon (1641), where an interpretation wholly favourable to women is put upon it. We meet with it again in works subsequent to those of Poulain. It evidently came to be included among the stock arguments against women.

A curious inference is drawn from the fact that the names and attributes of God are masculine : “ Infini, Tout-Puissant, Seigneur, Père, Souverain, Roy, Miséricordieux.” This

(1) “ Melior est iniquitas viri, quam mulier bene faciens, et confundens in opprobrium.” Vulgate version.

(2) *Discours ou Sermon apologétique en faveur des Femmes*, par Louis Machon, Paris, chez T. Blaize, 1641.

is supposed to point to the inferiority of the female sex. The same conclusion is drawn from the story of the creation of Eve from one of Adam's ribs, the fact that Adam was made first, the account of the Fall, etc. These are all stock arguments with which we meet again, repeated *ad nauseam* by later writers. Although Poulain had embarked upon an honest attempt to state the case for the opposition, one cannot help noticing the inferior quality of his opponent's reasoning.

Indeed, this self-denying task seems to have proved too much for our author; he cannot forbear casting aside the mask and stepping forward, in his true character as champion of down-trodden woman, to tilt at the bogey which he had set up. In the first edition of *l'Excellence* his answers to the scriptural arguments are included in the preface; in the second (1690), they form a special section, while the whole is preceded

by *l'Egalité des deux Sexes*. Perhaps he felt that the biblical objections would carry such weight that it would be dangerous to leave them unanswered. It is possible, moreover, that he was glad to seize the opportunity of thus stating and answering arguments which were well known and in current circulation among his opponents.

Poulain's answers need not delay us long. They do not rise much above the level of the opposing arguments themselves. Thus he points out that "man" is used in Scripture, so as to include "woman," and turns the tables on his adversary by contending that Eve was created after Adam because the best was kept till the last in accordance with a general scheme of progress towards perfection. He brings much casuistry to bear upon the words of the curse pronounced against Eve, in order to mitigate the idea of her dependence on Adam, and even ventures to doubt the

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authenticity of this passage in the Vulgate.¹ He frequently appeals to the Christian Fathers for support, and when all else fails falls back on "custom" as a satisfactory explanation of unwelcome facts. It does not seem to occur to him that the prevalence of the custom is in itself a phenomenon that needs explanation. Thus his opponent instances the *custom* of using masculine names to describe God as an argument in favour of man's superiority. Poulain dismisses the argument by saying that this use of masculine names was due to *custom*.

The weight of his task seems even, for the time, to modify his views. After inveighing against men's arrogance in claiming superiority over women, he adds, "Mais c'est nullement une injustice de ne les pas appeler au partage de ce que nous possédons," and

(¹) For this he is taken to task by the author of the *Traité de la Liberté*, etc. (1694.)

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adds that many of men's duties would be too onerous for women, while to divide the same function between the two sexes would often prove inconvenient.

Finally, he arrives at four general considerations which, he says, counterbalance all that the Scriptures say in disparagement of women—

(1) They do not refer to all women.

(2) They say as much in favour of women as against them.

(3) The ill they say of men surpasses that which they say of women.

(4) Their criticism of women would apply equally well to men. “En effet,” he adds, “une mère qui voudroit instruire sa fille, ne pourrait-elle pas luy parler de cette sorte : Ma fille, ne vous trouvez point parmi les hommes, etc. ?” Thus by the simple process of putting *man* for *woman* and *woman* for *man*, he would turn the whole of Ecclesiasticus to his advan-

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tage ! He seems quite serious in regarding this as a fair proceeding, and quite unconscious of treating the authority of the Bible—which he, of course, acknowledges—with anything but respect.

His imaginary opponent continues his attack on *l'Egalité des deux Sexes* by referring to disparaging remarks made by Greek and Latin writers on the subject of women. From these he proceeds to the moderns, and quotes a passage from Régnier's fifth satire which serves as text for a long discourse on that vanity which is "le fond de l'humeur des femmes." To appreciate the extent of this feminine weakness it is not sufficient to observe women, "en cérémonie et au cercle où elles viennent composées pour s'attirer de l'encens. Elles sont comme un beau soulier, dont on ne connoist point le défaut pour le regarder simplement."

At this point Poulain once more breaks

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through his disguise, and, laying aside his assumed impartiality, speaks his mind as one who can no longer bear the strain of supporting a false hypothesis.

“ Quoy que ce qu’il y a dans le livre de l’Egalité des Sexes, et dans la préface de celui-cy, puisse suffire pour satisfaire à toutes les difficultez considérables que l’on peut avoir sur ce sujet, il ne sera pas néanmoins inutile d’y ajouter quelques remarques.”

“ Nous prétendons simplement que les deux sexes considérez selon les avantages naturels du corps et de l’esprit, sont également capables, également nobles et également estimables.”

It is not a question whether women ought to hold responsible positions now confined to men, but whether they could do so if custom permitted it. Their physical disadvantages could be remedied by special training such as is contemplated in the republics of Lycurgus and Plato. The argument from custom is

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worthless ; it could be equally well employed in favour of Mohammedanism. The opinion of women in general should not weigh with us. They have been accustomed to take their ideas from men, but must be taught to think for themselves. The theory of the “*constitution froide et sèche*” peculiar to women does not accord with other well-known characteristics of the sex.

Finally, women, as the apostles of love, are superior to men. Love is the greatest thing in the world, the most conspicuous phenomenon in nature. Even the attraction of matter for matter “*peut être fort bien appelé amour, sans que la métaphore soit fort éloignée.*” Carried away by his subject, Poulain becomes eloquent and rhapsodic. Value in the scale of creation is to be estimated solely by capability of loving, a power which brings the creature into resemblance with the Creator. “*Ainsi l’amour est le commencement, la fin,*

le bonheur et la perfection de l'homme." In this respect women surpass man. They are past masters in the art of love. What is knowledge in comparison ? " La science des hommes est une pure charlatanerie ; il n'y a que la science d'aimer qui mérite un si beau nom, puisque nous ne pouvons ny faire ny sçavoir autre chose avec certitude."

In conclusion Poulain once more assures us of his sincerity. His object in displaying the arguments of his adversaries has been to expose their falseness. " Ce n'a été que pour mieux connoître leurs erreurs et leurs préjugés que je me suis appliqué à celui-cy (*l'Excellence des Hommes*) qui les renferme presque tous."¹

The *Education des Dames* appeared in 1674, between the publication of the *Egalité des deux Sexes* and that of *l'Excellence des Hommes*. It contains an exposition of Poul-

(¹) See above, p. 54, and note.

ain's views in the form of conversations between Sophie, Eulalie, Timandre and Stasimaque. The characters of these personages, indicated to some extent by their names, are well differentiated in their several contributions to the discussion. Sophie, a young lady with a taste for study, is naturally in favour of teaching her less enlightened sisters to avail themselves of the treasures of learning which she has come to prize so highly. Her common sense and good taste, however, save her from the extravagance and affectation of the *Précieuse* and the *Savante*—types which provoke her indignation and incur her severest censure.

Eulalie, though less intellectually inclined, is a well-educated and enlightened girl in full sympathy with Sophie's ideals.

Timandre represents the typical well-bred young man of the day who greets these new-fangled notions with a smile. He is surprised

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to find that Poulain is really in earnest, for he has hitherto looked upon his utterances and those of other feminist writers as merely intellectual exercises or *jeux d'esprit*. He is fond of the society of women whom he regards, as a matter of course, as inferior to men and unfitted for intellectual pursuits. Hitherto, intellectual women have been associated in his mind with the *Précieuses*, on whom in common with the mass of his fellow-countrymen and countrywomen, he looks with amused contempt. The other members of the party endeavour to enlighten him on this point, and to convince him that it is possible to give women a liberal education without producing in them the faults which characterise the followers of this cult. The latter affect learning, not for learning's sake, but rather with a view to their own vainglory, and are more anxious to be in the fashion than to improve the condition of their sex.

Stasimaque, as the writer is careful to inform us, is Poulain himself. On him falls the lion's share of the conversation. He directs it throughout and sums up each discussion with a statement of his views. Needless to say, the others look up to him as a man of light and leading, and treat his opinions with the greatest respect.

In his dedication, addressed to "son altesse royale Mademoiselle," Poulain explains that his object is to afford help and guidance to women in order "qu'elles travaillent généreusement. à surmonter la mollesse où la coutume les réduit, et qu'elles employent une partie du repos et du loisir dont elles jouissent, à une étude sérieuse qui leur apprenne solidement ce qui est nécessaire pour le bonheur et pour le règlement de la vie." The chief aim of this study should be to give them "une raison souveraine qui les rende capables de juger de toutes choses sainement et

sans prévention," to prevent them from becoming the slaves of tradition, custom and prejudice.

At the outset Stasimaque instances certain reforms which he would like to see carried out. Girls should not be put *en religion* against their will ; the husband's authority should be limited and measures taken to prevent the abuse of it, " car rien ne m'est plus sensible que de voir une femme obligée de vivre avec un brutal ou un jaloux qui la rend misérable." There should be formed a " conseil souverain my-party d'hommes et de femmes " to protect women's interests ; provision should be made for women's higher education.

Timandre fears that all this would lead to *préciosité*, and draws a harrowing picture of the *Précieuses* and *Savantes* and of the baleful effects of study upon women. Sophie and Stasimaque quite share his opinion of these ladies, but declare that they know others who

are intellectual without displaying their vanity and affectation. As to the effects of study upon the attractiveness of women, Stasimaque explains that the methods in vogue in the schools must not be applied in their case. Study must be made pleasant for them, “ *un exercice doux et facile, lequel cultivant leur esprit sans altérer leur corps, les mettroit en état de faire valoir hautement leur mérite.*”

Knowledge is the foundation of virtue, and therefore of happiness. Without its aid it is impossible to acquire that philosophical outlook on life which alone can enable us to meet its trials with equanimity. For these reasons knowledge is as necessary for women as for men ; why should women be deprived of the higher intellectual pleasures ? Let us do away with the stigma which attaches to the word “ effeminate.” Enough that woman’s body is subject to man : let her mind be free.

Eulalie, who takes a practical, common-

sense view, thinks that “ si les femmes estoient bien instruites, les mariages en seraient meilleurs, les familles mieux conduites et les enfants mieux élevez. Nous ne serions pas obligées d'estre éternellement aux oreilles d'un Directeur à luy dire des bagatelles.—Les Supérieures conduiroient leurs Religieuses ; les mères instruiroient leurs filles, et chaque sexe se réglant soy-mesme, comme se connoissant mieux, les choses n'en iroient peut-estre pas plus mal.”

Poulain admits that in the case of women the curriculum must be shortened. Foreign languages are necessary only for those who follow the learned professions. French supplies all that is needed in the way of linguistic training. Let women study the humanities without Latin or Greek.

Two of the conversations are concerned with a disquisition on knowledge in general and the value of self-knowledge in particular.

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The last gives a suggested scheme of study suitable for women.

Geometry is recommended as providing good mental training. A good book on the French language has yet to be written : meanwhile the *Grammaire Raisonnée* may be studied. A preliminary course of Philosophy is essential, and the Port Royal Logic and the works of Descartes are recommended. In theology the New Testament, read in an intelligent way, is sufficient. In this, as in other studies, Poulain advocates a bold spirit of inquiry. The principal thing is to cultivate one's faculty of observation and powers of reasoning. "Tâchez de ne rien laisser passer ny en vous-mesmes ny dans vos semblables sans y faire réflexion." "Sur toutes choses ne vous payez point de mots, ny d'un ouï dire. Vous avez une Raison, servez-vous-en et ne la sacrifiez aveuglément à personne." Popular prejudices are to be

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brought to the bar of reason. No idea is to be rejected on account of its strangeness : “ ne vous en effarouchez point.”

After this preliminary course the student may be left to follow her own tastes. French translations of the *Institutes* of Justinian, of the works of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian may be read with advantage.

Politics present little difficulty. They are founded on the natural equality of men and the necessity for work and mutual help.

The Cartesian philosophy is recommended because a knowledge of Latin and Greek is necessary for the study of Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus. Of French philosophers Descartes is the best. Although, as Timandre remarks, “ toutes les Universitez de France sont Péripatéticiennes et que les Cartésiens y sont si mal reçus, qu'on ne veut pas seulement les y écouter,” yet there are plenty of people, as intelligent as the Peripatetics, who follow the

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philosophy of Descartes. "Il y a aussi des Universitez entières en Angleterre, en Hollande et en Pologne, d'où l'on a fait sortir Aristote pour y faire venir Descartes."

Poulain describes his conversion to Cartesianism and its bearing on the feministic question. His former studies were on scholastic lines, and he looked on women "scholastiquement"—as monsters, far inferior to men.

Timandre is afraid that if once the idea of women's inferiority is abandoned, they will not meet with the indulgence and deference now accorded to them. In the *cercles* their every utterance is listened to with polite attention. Eulalie thinks the change would be beneficial. She could dispense with such flattery if the learned would condescend to let her share their treasures of knowledge. To this Stasimaque gallantly replies that from one who combines beauty with intelligence as does

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Eulalie, there is nothing the learned can withhold.

After further compliments, the discussion comes to an end and the company disperses.

It remains for us to summarize Poulain's views on the feminist question, as expressed in the three works we have just considered.

CHAPTER III.

POULAIN'S POSITION.

HAVING thus briefly examined Poulain's three feministic works, we are in a position to consider what were his views on the question of the emancipation of women.

That he was in earnest there can be no doubt. He had nothing in common with those pseudo-feminist writers, of whom there were a good number in his day, who set out with the professed intention of proving the equality of the sexes, or even the superiority of women, in order that they might thereby have an opportunity of displaying their learning and wit, and of gaining a reputation for "galanterie" by paying so delicate a compliment to the fair sex. "Quand un homme

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parle à leur avantage," he says, speaking of women in his preface to the *Egalité*, "l'on imagine aussitôt que c'est par galanterie ou par amour." Lest these motives should be ascribed to him he adds, "On a cru qu'il falloit parler sérieusement et en avertir de peur que la pensée que ce seroit un ouvrage de galanterie ne le fasse passer légèrement, ou regretter par les personnes scrupuleuses." Further on he says, "On n'a parlé jusqu'à présent qu'à la légère de la différence des deux sexes"—a statement true enough in the main, but to which we must add certain restrictions in favour of such writers as Mlle de Gournay, Mlle de Schurman and Jacqueline Guillaume, whose works we shall notice later. We have already seen how, in his *Education des Dames*, he assures Timandre of the sincerity of his views.

What *were* his views? Lest there should be any doubt on the matter, he states them

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categorically several times in the course of his three books, but it must be confessed that there is some slight discrepancy between these statements.

At the beginning of his treatise on equality he tells us that his intention is to shew “ *que les femmes sont aussi nobles, aussi parfaites, et aussi capables que les hommes.*” As to their following the professions and occupying posts of responsibility in the State, such a condition of things would surprise us, “ *mais ce ne seroit que par le raison de la nouveauté.*”

Further on in the same book he remarks that, sex being a physical distinction and mind having no sex, there is no reason why women should not study any of those subjects which are included in a liberal education for men. This leads up to the definite statement that “ *Les femmes ne sont moins capables que les hommes des emplois de la société.*” He would have the universities open their

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doors to them ; why should they not act as teachers, ministers of religion and officers of State ? He even goes so far as to say, “ Pour moi je ne serois pas plus surpris de voir une femme le casque en teste, que de lui voir une couronne.”

The whole question is summed up in the words with which he brings his treatise to a close : “ On prétend icy qu’il y a une égalité entière entre les deux sexes.”

In his book *De l’Excellence des Hommes*, Poulain, apparently influenced by the biblical arguments of his imaginary adversary—arguments which he has endeavoured to refute—considerably modifies the expression of his views. He fiercely assails men’s claim to superiority, their tyranny in keeping women in subjection, the injustice of the law in its dealings with the two sexes ; “ mais c’est nullement une injustice de ne les pas appeler au partage de ce que nous possédons,” he

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adds. Indeed, he admits that many of men's duties would be too onerous for women, while it would often prove inconvenient that the same function should be shared by the two sexes. Nevertheless, the inequality here suggested is only external and does not affect the essential equality of the sexes.

In his "remarques nécessaires pour l'éclaircissement de quelques difficultez sur l'égalité des sexes," included in the same book, he puts his thesis thus: "Nous prétendons simplement que les deux sexes considérez selon les avantages naturels du corps et de l'esprit, sont également capables, également nobles et également estimables," and adds that the question is not whether women *should* hold certain positions, but whether they *could* do so if society were so organised as to admit of it. This, again, is a milder view than that expressed in his first book.

At the conclusion of *l'Excellence des Hommes*

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he contents himself with saying, “ Je ne vois guères de plus grande marque de la prévention des hommes que la persuasion où ils sont du mérite et de la noblesse de leur sexe.”

In his *Education des Dames*, Poulain expresses his desire that women “ travaillent généreusement à surmonter la mollesse où la coutume les réduit, et qu’elles employent une partie du repos et du loisir dont elles jouissent, à une étude sérieuse qui leur apprenne solidement ce qui est nécessaire pour le bonheur et pour le règlement de la vie.”

He regards it as unjust and tyrannical that they should be deprived of intellectual pleasures, and ascribes their unhappy position in this respect to the jealousy of men. If women were better educated there would be fewer unhappy marriages, he thinks ; mothers would be able to instruct their children, superiors their *religieuses* : each sex would look after

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its own affairs and life would run more smoothly. Since virtue is founded on reason and knowledge, education is essential to women's happiness in this world and the next.

As for the form that this education is to take, Poulain would shorten the route by omitting Greek and Latin, and substituting good French translations for the original classical authors. In other respects the curriculum would follow the lines of a liberal humanistic education.

We may thus sum up Poulain's views on the equality of the sexes. He denies that woman is in any sense inferior to man : her characteristic failings are due to custom, tradition and defective education. She is in every way as capable as man, sex having no influence on mind, and even as regards physical effort for which her strength is insufficient, it is probable that with proper training she would acquit herself equally well.

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As to whether she should engage in what is generally considered as men's work, that is a point on which Poulain wavers. At one time he seems to say that she should ; at another, he is content with affirming that she could do so if society were so organised as to permit of it.

Similarly, though he maintains that a course of study suited for one sex is equally fitted for the other, yet, owing to the exigencies of the existing state of things, he would, in the case of women, omit all foreign languages in order to shorten the route.

That every possible facility for education and study should be given to women, as to men, he has not the slightest doubt.

Poulain goes further than Mlle de Gournay and Anna Von Schurman, who accept woman's subordinate position in society as inevitable, and are content with advocating her intellectual emancipation. On the other hand

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he does not go so far as such writers as Jacqueline Guillame, Noel, and the author of *La Femme Gènereuse*, who seek to shew the absolute superiority of the female sex, while his sincerity differentiates him from those who, like Vertron and De Crues, have no decided views, and treat the subject as an exercise of wit and an opportunity for parading their learning and literary skill.

The writers mentioned above are typical of those who concerned themselves with feministic questions in the seventeenth century. It will be necessary briefly to pass some of their works in review in order to see what ideas were current at this time, and thus, by comparing these writers with Poulain, to attempt to estimate the nature and probable influence of his work—to place him, in fact, among his contemporaries.

CHAPTER IV.

POULAIN AND OTHER FEMINIST WRITERS OF THE XVIIth CENTURY.

AMONG Poulain's predecessors, the two most serious vindicators of the feministic position are Mlle de Gournay and Maria von Schurman. *L'Ombre de la damoiselle de Gournay* appeared in 1626 ; it contains a short treatise entitled *L'Egalité des hommes et des femmes*. It is probable that Poulain was acquainted with this work, for it was evidently appreciated by those interested in the subject. In his *Conversations sur l'excellence du Beau Sex* (1699) Vertron remarks, " On sçait combien on a esté charmé en France de celle (l'oeuvre) de Mlle de Gournay, la Fille d'Alliance du fameux Mon-

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tagne, et les Délices de tous les beaux esprits de son temps.” Again, Maria von Schurman, in her *Dissertatio*, speaks of Mlle de Gournay as “ce noble ornement de sa famille,” and praises “le petit discours qu’elle a fait de l’égalité des hommes et des femmes.”

Mlle de Gournay claims that the two sexes are equal in ability, but she is not an extreme advocate of the cause of women. She supports her view by copious quotations from ancient and modern writers as well as from the Bible, and by numerous historical examples. The apparent inferiority of women is, according to her, due to their lack of education. Sex is a physical distinction and does not affect the mind. “Il n’y a rien plus semblable au chat sur une fenêtre que la chatte.” She answers many of the scriptural arguments treated later by Poulain. The question of the Fall, of the creation of “man” in the image of God, and the significance of the

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sex of Jesus are all discussed by her, and the objections founded on them refuted.

The *Dissertatio de Ingenii Muliebris ad Doctrinam et Meliores Litteras aptitudine*, by Maria von Schurman, a Dutch lady, was published in 1638, but it was not till 1646 that there appeared a French translation entitled : *Question célèbre, s'il est nécessaire ou non, que les Filles soient sçavantes*, by G. Colletet.

The discourse is addressed to André Rivet, whose reply is incorporated with it. The writer maintains that all women whose freedom from domestic duties affords them sufficient leisure should devote themselves to study. Rivet, on the other hand, thinks that certain women only are fitted for this.

Mlle von Schurman is not a thorough-going feminist. The higher education of women is her sole theme. Their exclusion from the professions and from public office

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gives them more leisure to devote to study. Their present state of idleness leads to vice. Many examples of learned women are quoted from history. Theology, history, and languages are mentioned as suitable studies for women, and the dissertation concludes with a panegyric on Lady Jane Grey.

Rivet, in his answer, contends that few women are capable of study. In support of this he brings forward the temperament theory. Moreover, most women are precluded from study by domestic duties. He refers to *L'institution de la femme chrestienne* by Vives in support of this view. He quotes St Paul's famous words concerning "the weaker vessel," and contests the interpretation put upon them by Mlle de Gournay. He is extremely cynical on the subject of Jeanne d'Arc, the greatest admirers of whose valour "ne parlent de son honneur et de sa chasteté qu'avec beaucoup d'incertitude." He is

strongly opposed to mixed schools, and fears that, in the case of women, study may lead to scepticism.

In her reply, Anna von Schurman asserts that she does not lay claim to superiority on the part of women, and condemns those writers who have done so. Nor has she any wish to upset established custom in the matter of the relation of the sexes. Women are not specially fitted for study, but they are at present too much restricted to trivial occupations. Much as she admires Mlle de Gournay, she cannot go all the way with her.

Poulain owes little to either of the writers mentioned above. He is evidently more in sympathy with Mlle de Gournay's ideas than with the very moderate views of Anna von Schurman. To the former he may possibly be indebted for the notions that women's apparent inferiority to men is due to their defective education, and that sex, being a

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physical distinction, has no influence on mind. This latter contention, as well as Mlle de Gournay's interpretation of scriptural quotations which apparently point to women's inferiority—an interpretation which Poulain often adopts in his *Excellence des Hommes*—reappear in many other feminist writers. He makes no use of the arguments founded on the Fall, the sex of Jesus, etc., which are also mentioned by Mlle de Gournay, and form part of the regular stock-in-trade of later writers.

Among Poulain's predecessors we may mention four others, whose works, though dealing with kindred subjects, do not seem to have influenced him greatly.

L'Honneste Femme (1632) by Jacques du Bosc, is at once a manual for the guidance of women in society and a defence of the female sex. The author has no extreme views. He considers that custom and the laws are unjust

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to women, whose education he would improve on the ground that education makes for morality. He ridicules the common view which is represented by that of François, Duc de Bretagne, who admired Isabelle of Scotland for her ignorance, “croyant qu’une femme est assez sçavante quand elle peut mettre différence entre la chemise et le pourpoint de son mary.”

On the other hand he condemns the professed *Savantes* “qui s’estudient trop à passer pour suffisantes.” He would provide women with a reasonable education such as would enable them to make conversation interesting, and would give them the means of employing their leisure profitably and pleasantly.

In 1641 appeared the *Discours ou Sermon Apologétique en faveur des Femmes*, by Louis Machon. It is an attempt to interpret in a sense favourable to women the famous text of Ecclesiasticus (ch. 42, v. 14), and is especi-

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ally interesting to us inasmuch as Poulain later undertook the same task. Machon claims to be the first to “adoucir ceste vieille accusation de l’Ecclésiastique,” and it is probable that he set the fashion for Poulain and other later writers. He interprets “mulier bene faciens” as “une femme complaisante,” and takes the text to mean that a higher standard of conduct is looked for in women, whose vices therefore shock us more than men’s. Poulain’s reading is “que les faveurs d’une femme artificieuse qui a dessein de tromper, sont plus à craindre qu’une injustice ouverte.”¹

Incidentally Machon attacks the inequality of the moral code as regards men and women respectively, and defends the latter against the charges habitually brought against their sex. He evidently plumes himself upon his originality and broad-mindedness in combat-

(¹) *De l’Excellence des Hommes*. See above, p. 66.

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ing the commonly accepted view that women, as such, are inherently bad. God gave men authority over women, but compensated the latter by bestowing upon them superior physical charm.

The Creation theory is discussed, and Machon points out, with St Ambrose, that it was not till Eve came into being that God pronounced His Creation good.

The two remaining writers whose books call for notice are both professed *Savantes*. *La Femme Généreuse* (1643) is extravagantly feministic, the writer's object being to shew "que son sexe est plus noble, meilleur politique, plus vaillant, plus sçavant, plus vertueux, et plus oeconome que celui des hommes."

She has devoted herself to study "par la contagion de la mode," and also because, men having grown effeminate and foppish, it is for women to shew that they are capable of in-

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tellectual achievement, since other spheres of activity are closed to them. Her desire is to communicate to others of her sex the benefits she has derived from study.

As to her method of proving the superiority of women and incidentally displaying her erudition, it consists in bringing forward the well-worn stock arguments of the Fall, the Creation, the theory of temperaments, the physical nature of sex, etc., and interpreting them in a sense favourable to women. She inveighs against men's tyranny and presumption and endeavours to shew by a large number of examples from sacred and profane history that women have displayed qualities far more brilliant than those of men.

Jacquette Guillaume, the author of *Les Dames Illustres*, 1665, "où par bonnes et fortes raisons il se prouve que le Sexe Féminin surpasse en toute sorte de genres le Sexe Masculin," expresses similar views, and makes

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the same use of historical examples. The conclusion she arrives at is violently dogmatic and exaggerated in tone. Women are superior to men in every respect, while "les ouvrages les plus merveilleux que Dieu a faits icy-bas ont toujours esté exécutés par des femmes." "Venez, petits Pigmées," she says to men, "venez voir Caïn qui tue son frère Abel," etc.

Her arguments are so quaint and far fetched as to deserve mention. Thus Eve was superior to Adam, not only because she was created last, but because her creation took place inside Paradise, while Adam came into existence outside. Even the gender of words is made to indicate the superiority of women. "Ce qu'on estime le plus dans le monde, n'est-ce pas la vie, la santé, la religion, la parole et les sciences?" Other feminine words mentioned in this connection are *la royauté, la principauté, les richesses, les honneurs*. Were the author still alive, it would

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be interesting to hear her views on the present gender of the last of these.

She attacks the pedants and their scorn of women and vindicates the *Savantes*. “Après tout, ce n'est pas une chose fort agréable qu'une belle beste.”

A large part of the book is filled with the histories of great women and bad men.

With these two writers it is evident that Poulain had little sympathy. His opinions appear moderate in comparison with theirs, and their arguments are such as he puts into the mouths of his opponents or uses in meeting their attacks, but disdains to employ in support of his own views. His dislike of the professed *Savante* is clearly expressed in his *Education des Dames*.

Of Poulain's successors D. J. B. Decrues first claims our attention. His book, entitled *Les Entretiens de Théandre et d'Isménie sur l'ancien et fameux Différend de la Prééminence*

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de Sexe entre l'Homme et la Femme was published in 1687. A second edition appeared in 1689.

At first sight it bears some resemblance to Poulain's *Education*, and it is possible that its author borrowed from him the idea of presenting his treatise in the form of conversation. As in the case of Poulain's work the chief speaker is a young lady, Isménie, while the author, in the person of Théandre, sums up the question at the end of the book. Like Poulain, too, he protests at the outset that he is in earnest, and remarks that most writers have treated the question as "une pure matière de galanterie."¹ It is not unlikely that this is a case of conscious imitation, for he is evidently familiar with what has already been written on the subject, and apologises for treading a path "tant de fois rebatu." Here, however, the resemblance ends, for his

(¹) See above, pp. 52, 53, 85, 86.

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book has little in common with Poulain's work. Indeed, he somewhat inconsistently remarks, further on, that it is "plutost un jeu d'esprit qu'un ouvrage d'application." It will prove useful as an aid to conversation, "le sujet de ce livre estant la matière la plus ordinaire des entretiens que la société humaine lie entre les deux sexes."

Though he claims to present his subject in an entirely new form, the points discussed are the favourite and familiar ones : the order of Creation, Christ's sex, the gender of words (e.g., *aigle* and *serpent*), which is confused with sex, classical and biblical examples of distinguished women, the temperament theory, men's tyranny and women's defective education, St Paul's view of women, feminine failings and the famous verse from *Ecclesiasticus* (ch. 42, v. 14).

There is much display of wit throughout, and a frequent recurrence of the popular tem-

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perament theory. In his conclusion the author leaves the question open.

Of a more serious nature is the *Traité de la Liberté, de la Science et de l'Autorité*, by G. S. Aristophile,¹ 1694, which seeks to prove that, though women are deprived of these three privileges, yet they are duly qualified by nature to participate in them. The author takes for granted woman's subordinate position in society, and pleads only for her intellectual emancipation, "sans qu'il soit besoin pour cela de se révolter contre les hommes ni de secouer le joug de leur obéissance—et sans rien diminuer à ceux du premier sexe." Her moderation is largely due to the fact that she is a faithful daughter of the Church. She approves of "les deux états du cloître et du mariage," and sees no antagonism between learning and piety.

(¹) "Notre bien-aimée Damoiselle G. S.," in the *Privilège*.

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Her arguments are of the kind with which we are now familiar ; she repudiates the failings commonly ascribed to women, asserts that the soul is independent of sex, and instances the favourite historical examples of Judith, Deborah, etc.

She has read Poulain's works and crosses swords with him over his interpretation of the curse,¹ in which, she maintains, he seeks to "modérer la malédiction que Dieu fulmina contre Eve," while "pour favoriser son parti, il s'aide d'une version Hébraïque qui semble un peu en adoucir la rigueur." She, of course, accepts the Vulgate version in its literal sense, and refuses to explain away St Paul's dictum that "the husband is the head of the wife," as Poulain attempts to do. One of her examples she admits having taken from his *Egalité des deux Sexes*. Like him she holds that women could perform the duties now restricted to

(1) See above, p. 69, note.

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men, but hesitates to say that they ought to be allowed to do so.

Equally in earnest, apparently, but far more extravagant in his opinions is C. M. D. Noel, author of *Les Avantages du Sexe ou le Triomphe des Femmes*, 1698, which seeks to establish the superiority of women to men, at the same time making an imposing display of the writer's erudition. It is not surprising to find him admitting, at the outset, that public opinion is against him. "C'est une témérité à moy," he says, "de prendre leur (women's) party."

He adduces the usual arguments, which we need not again recapitulate, and the usual historical examples, to prove the varied capabilities of women. He quotes the famous text from *Ecclesiasticus*, and adopts Poulain's interpretation.

The redeeming feature of his otherwise commonplace and uninteresting treatise is

the really eloquent peroration which brings it to a close. In it he protests, with evident sincerity, against the ignorance and the subordinate position of women in his day, the loveless marriages to which they are forced to submit, their subjection to their husbands, and the injustice which deprives them of the benefits of a liberal education.

The character of the *Conversations sur l'excellence du Beau Sexe*, 1699, by G. de Vertron, Historiographe Royal, is sufficiently shewn by the verses with which the author prefaces his work:

“ Pour m'égaier dans la rencontre
 J'ai soutenu le Pour, j'ai soutenu le Contre;
 Si sans prévention, sans aigreur, sans dépit
 Vous examinez mon ouvrage,
 Mêlant au sérieux un peu de badinage,
 Vous jugerez que c'est un jeu d'esprit.”

The composition of this treatise arose out of playful discussion with certain ladies and gentlemen of the Court, and the author tells

us that he was encouraged to undertake the work by the Duc de Saint Aignan and Madame la Dauphine. Its whole tone is redolent of the *Précieux*, the aristocrat and the courtier.

Though the work is only a " *jeu d'esprit*," and merely reproduces the well-worn " arguments," it includes a short bibliography in which the author mentions writers more serious than himself—among others Du Bosc (*L'honnête Femme*), and also Poulain de la Barre, whom he mistakes for two separate individuals: " M. Poulain a fait imprimer un livre de l'égalité des sexes. M. de la Barre a traité le même sujet." Special mention is made of " la profonde érudition de Mademoiselle de Schurman dans la Hollande," and also of Mlle de Gournay.

The latter portion of the book contains *portraits, madrigaux*, letters, verses, etc.

The view presented seems to be that, in-

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tellectually, women are men's equals. The inequality of the sexes in society is taken for granted.

In what relation does Poulain stand to these writers? Of his predecessors Mlle de Gournay is probably the one with whom he is most in sympathy. Like him she maintains the complete equality of the sexes as regards their capabilities, though she leaves alone the question of women doing men's work. She is free from the exaggeration of *Savantes* like Jacqueline Guillaume and the author of *La Femme Généreuse*, who boldly proclaim the superiority of women. "Moy qui fuyz toutes extrémitéz," she says, "je me contente de les égaler aux hommes."

With Maria Schurman's educational ideals, too, Poulain must have been in full sympathy, though in other respects both he and Mlle de Gournay were far more revolutionary in their views. With the two *Savantes* men-

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tioned above, as indeed with all extremists of their type, he had little in common. The professed *Savante* and the *Précieuse* stand condemned in his *Education des Dames*.

The works of Jacques du Bosc and Louis Machon are of a particular nature, somewhat apart from the others, but in as far as they treat of the questions discussed by Poulain, they express the same opinion, though in a more guarded and moderate way.

Yet Poulain owes little to his predecessors, though he was doubtless influenced in a general way by ideas which had already been expressed on the subject of the equality of the sexes. Two arguments on which he lays considerable stress—viz., that sex is a purely physical distinction, and has no effect upon mind, and that failings peculiar to the female sex are due to defective education and the state of subjection in which women have been kept for centuries—had already been insisted

on with considerable emphasis by Mlle de Gournay, and it may well be that her treatise suggested them to him. He does not follow her, however, in her use of historical examples, such as Judith, Jeanne d'Arc, etc., nor in the discussion of such futile questions as the significance of Christ's sex—arguments which later became very popular. It is possible that Mlle de Gournay set the fashion in this respect, for we find writer after writer repeating them until they came to be looked upon as indispensable points in the discussion. It is to Poulain's honour that he maintains his reasoning at a higher level, while he is speaking for himself, and puts such stock arguments into the mouth of his imaginary opponent in the *Excellence des Hommes*. In his *Egalité des deux Sexes* he only mentions them to dismiss them with contempt.¹

Du Bosc tells us that he was the first to inter-

(¹) E.g., The temperament theory; see pp. 63-64.

pret the text in *Ecclesiasticus* (ch. 42, v. 14) in a sense favourable to women. It was no doubt from the *Sermon Apologétique* that Poulain conceived the idea of introducing the discussion of this text into his book, though his interpretation differs slightly from that of Du Bosc. Here again, subsequent feminist writers were glad to make use of the weapons of their predecessors, and the famous verse duly reappears at a later date, and is interpreted in yet another fashion.¹

Apart from these few instances Poulain does not seem to have been indebted to previous writers. He gives us the impression of having judged the question upon first principles, and of having put down his ideas in a sincere and independent manner, in contrast with many other writers on feministic topics, who do not scruple to borrow from one

(¹) Decrues, *Les Entretiens de Théandre et d'Isménie*. 1687.

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another,¹ to repeat the same stock arguments and answer the same stereotyped objections *ad nauseam*.²

If Poulain owes little to his predecessors it is equally true that his successors owe little to him. What they did borrow was by no means the best he had to offer. Indeed, they might with advantage have made use of some of his ideas instead of incessantly citing the same historical examples, and constantly reiterating the same childish arguments, which he mentioned merely to shew how futile they were. It is these that form the bulk of their stock in trade.

(¹) Thus in *Les Entretiens de Théandre et d'Isménie* (1687) occurs a panegyric of Jeanne d'Arc taken almost verbatim from *La Femme Généreuse* (1643). Again the author of the *Traité de la Liberté*, etc. (1694) admits having borrowed from Poulain's *Egalité*.

(²) Such are inferences drawn in favour of the one or the other sex from their respective *temperaments* (constitution froide, sèche, humide, etc.), the order of creation (man created before woman), the superiority of male animals, the gender of words, Christ's sex, etc., etc.

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We have seen how anxious he was to dissociate himself from those who had treated the subject frivolously, and to avoid the charge of having taken up the cudgels on behalf of women "par galanterie ou par amour." It may be that in thus protesting his sincerity he became unconsciously responsible for the formula with which subsequent writers so frequently begin their treatise, to the effect that, though the subject is a well-worn one, yet they intend to treat it in an entirely original fashion, and that, while most writers have regarded it as "pure matière de galanterie," they are in deadly earnest. These two assurances they almost invariably fail to make good.¹

We have seen how the author of the *Traité de la Liberté*, etc., refers to Poulain's interpretation of the curse, and admits her indebtedness to him. Her views on the question of

(¹) Cf. Decrues: *Les Entretiens de Théandre*.

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women's part in public affairs are practically identical with his, and are probably traceable to the influence of his book.

Vertron, again, expressly mentions him as one of the writers worth consulting on the feminist question.

It is clear that Poulain had more in common with certain writers who preceded him than with the authors of the later works which we have examined. These feminist writers fall naturally into three groups. Poulain, Maria von Schurman, Mlle de Gournay,¹ Machon and Du Bosc are evidently in earnest. Each, in his or her own way, is anxious to raise the status of woman and to give her a better education than she has been wont to

(¹) Mlle de Gournay has much of the *Savante* about her. She is proud of her learning, but to display it is not her primary aim, and among her arguments are many which are characterised by sound sense. This is what distinguishes her from the professed *Savante* of a later date, who was the outcome of the *Précieuse* and whose vanity was her most conspicuous feature.

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receive. They differ as to the extent and the radical nature of their reforms, Poulain being the most revolutionary of the five, but all are characterised by the same sincerity of purpose. The authors of *La Femme G n reuse* and *Les Dames Illustres* are typical *Savantes* whose real object is to display their learning, and gratify their vanity by vaunting the intellectual heights which they and others of their kind have scaled. Their writings are extravagant, exaggerated, and even vindictive ; their thesis is that women are in every way superior to men. They advance no arguments worthy of the name, but rely on scholastic cavillings and subtle casuistry, backed up by an immense number of historical examples which serve the double purpose of supporting their plea and parading their erudition. *Les Avantages du Sexe* is a similar treatise, and, though the author, C. M. D. Noel, speaks as a man, one cannot help suspecting that one of these

learned ladies lurks behind this disguise. On the other hand, the protest against women's ignorance at the end of the book attains, at times, a pitch of earnestness and eloquence which tends to refute this hypothesis. The *Traité de la Liberté* is also the work of a *Savante*, and resembles the others in its display of learning, but the author's piety and submission to clerical influence lead her to adopt a more moderate attitude, and to refrain from attacking the established order of things—the subordination of women to men included. De Crues and Vertron represent the courtier and the *Précieux*, the frequenter of the *ruelle*, the dilettante who dabbles in literature that he may earn a reputation for wit, and who sings the praises of the fair sex in order that he may pose as an *homme galant*. De Crues admits that his treatise is “plutost un jeu d'esprit qu'un ouvrage d'application,” and considers it a great recommen-

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dation that it will prove a useful aid to conversation, "le sujet de ce livre estant la matière la plus ordinaire des entretiens que la société humaine lie entre les deux sexes." Vertron tells us how his book arose from a playful discussion among ladies and gentlemen of the Court. Polite verse, *madrigaux* and *portraits* form a salient feature of this work, which was not, of course, intended to be serious.

What strikes us most as a result of this three-fold classification is the fact that the earnest advocates of woman's education and woman's emancipation stand quite apart from the world of the *Précieuse* and her later development, the professed *Savante*. The writers of the two last schools have much in common. Vanity, which shewed itself in the one case in a display of wit and in the other in a parade of learning, was the motive of each. Their methods, too, were similar, and a remarkable

lack of originality, together with an equally remarkable facility for borrowing from one another and repeating the same examples and arguments, characterises them all. These arguments, as we have seen, were not of a high order, and a writer who conceived the happy idea of combining two or three of those which had been advanced separately by his predecessors achieved a degree of originality of which he felt he had good right to be proud. Thus the author of *Les Avantages du Sexe*, after reiterating the familiar contentions that soul is independent of sex, and that woman's "constitution humide" is especially suited for intellectual achievements — "Elle (l'humidité) est le propre de la mémoire"—combines these ideas thus : Soul is independent of sex. Therefore any difference of aptitude for learning must reside in the body. Woman's physical constitution, being more humid than man's, is more open to the impression of new

ideas, and thus it is that woman is better suited for intellectual achievement than man.

The works of Poulain are distinguished by an entire absence of this childish quibbling. We have seen how he dismissed the theory of women's "constitution humide" with contempt, and it was only when dealing with his opponents, whose habitual weapons were of this kind, that he stooped to similar tactics in order to meet them on their own ground.¹ For it must be borne in mind that the charm of these arguments rested in the fact that they could be used by either side. Thus one writer contends that the fact of Adam's creation occurring before that of Eve gives man the pre-eminence ; another asserts that if Eve was created after Adam it was because God kept the best till last. One points out that Christ assumed the male sex to shew its superiority over the female ; another explains

(¹) In the *Excellence de l'Homme*.

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that He did so because His mission was to save *men* from their sins, their need, in this respect, being far greater than that of women.

Poulain follows a higher line and maintains a greater degree of dignity throughout. His arguments may not always be convincing, but they never descend to the level of those we have just considered. In this respect he is even superior to other writers who were equally serious. Mlle de Gournay set the fashion of quoting numerous historical examples ; she first enunciated the doctrine that mind or soul was unaffected by sex ; from the text “ *Masculum et feminam fecit eos* ” she drew the conclusion that men and women are equal in all respects, and by a curious argument attempted to explain the reason for Christ’s sex.¹ Machon, too, quotes St Ambrose as

(1) “ Il le falloit par nécessaire bien-séance, ne se pouvant pas sans scandale mesler jeune, et à toutes les heures du jour et de la nuit parmy les presses afin de convertir, secourir et sauver le genre humain, s’il eust été du sexe des femmes : signamment en face de la malignité des Juifs.” *Egalité des Hommes et des Femmes*.

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declaring that woman was superior to man because it was not till Eve was created that God pronounced His creation good. These, however, are isolated instances occurring in works which proceed, for the most part, on more rational lines.

Poulain's work, too, stands pre-eminent in that he had a definite propaganda which was more extensive than that of any other writer. He was not content with discussing, in an academic way, the relative merits of the sexes. His first book is a serious contention that woman's status in society should be raised, that her subjection to man, especially as exemplified in the all too autocratic authority of father and husband, should be lightened, and that her wasted powers should be fruitfully employed for the good of society. In his *Education des Dames* he not only pleads for her intellectual emancipation, but lays down a practical scheme of study which has

much to recommend it. In this he is inspired, not, as was commonly the case with other reformers in his day, by mistrust of woman's nature and a consequent desire to keep her occupied,¹ but by a genuine respect for her sex, and a point of view which, as Kant would have said, regarded women as ends in themselves.

(¹) E.g., Fénelon, Mme. de Maintenon, etc. Cf. G. Faguiez, *Revue des deux Mondes*, 1909, p. 342: *La femme et la société française dans la première moitié du dix-septième siècle*. "Qu'il périclite ou qu'il soit florissant, l'enseignement féminin s'inspire de la même idée et s'applique avec prédilection au même but: la méfiance de la nature féminine, la préoccupation de la prémunir contre les entraînements, de tenir toujours les jeunes filles occupées, à la fois pour les protéger contre les tentations de l'oisiveté et pour les préparer à gagner leur vie et à tenir leur intérieur."

CHAPTER V.

THE FEMINISTS AND THE PRÉCIEUSES.

WE have passed in review no less than thirteen feminist works, published between the years 1626 and 1699. It is clear that they were not isolated efforts, but formed part of a special literature dealing with the position of women in society. These writers are for the most part familiar with one another's works: thus Anna von Schurman and Rivet both refer in appreciative terms to Mlle de Gournay's treatise; the author of *La Traité de la Liberté*, etc., discusses Poulain's work, while Vertron mentions Mlle de Gournay, Anna von Schurman, Du Bosc and Poulain as feminist writers who are worthy of study. That the subject was a popular one, whether treated seriously or as a mere

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jeu d'esprit, is shewn by the fact that these authors often consider it necessary to apologise for treating a well-worn theme—"un chemin tant de fois rebatu," as Decrues puts it—and to protest that, while many have treated it frivolously or have written upon it "par galanterie ou par amour," they themselves are really in earnest. Decrues further tells us that it formed the most common topic of polite conversation—"la matière la plus ordinaire des entretiens"—while further evidence of the general interest taken in the question of the relation of the sexes is afforded by the fact that in 1698 there appeared a French edition of the *Lady's New Year Gift*, an anti-feminist treatise by the Marquis of Halifax, published in London ten years previously.

What gave rise to this awakened interest in woman, in her education, her proper position and her legitimate function in human

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society ? There can be little doubt that it was due, at least indirectly, to the *Précieuses*.

The celebrated *réunions* at the Hôtel de Rambouillet had given woman a new and higher status, at least in polite society. Such women as Mlle de Scudéry were the direct products of the movement initiated by the *Précieuses*, and could not fail to exert a powerful influence upon the minds of those who moved in their aristocratic and somewhat restricted sphere. The cult of woman became fashionable. Those authors who did not write about her wrote for her. She became a favourite topic of conversation and of academic discussion in the *cercle* and the *salon*, and a ready means for the Court gallant with literary aspirations to shew his wit, and, at the same time, his devotion to the fair sex.

The more serious side of this phase shewed itself in the educational experiments of Mme de Maintenon and the educational theories of

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Fénelon. Extremely moderate and cautious though they appear to us, they were yet in advance of the public opinion of their day, and indicated a more serious view of woman's place in society, and a deeper interest in her welfare.

These tendencies might have developed still further and borne good fruit had it not been for the extravagant lengths to which the *Précieuses* went, and the consequent hostility which was aroused in the public mind by their exclusiveness, their conceit and their ridiculous affectation. From the first their sympathies were aristocratic and their tastes merely literary. They were in no sense active feminists, reformers. They had no propaganda. To be in the fashion, to attract admiration, to be different from the general run of women—these were the objects of their ambition. Yet, had it not been for their very conspicuous failings which set common-sense people

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against them, they might have exerted—unconsciously, unintentionally—an influence which would have made itself felt more widely. As it was, public opinion remained for the most part hostile to feminist ideas. Poulain points out that it was generally believed that women had less intelligence than men and were naturally their inferiors in every respect ; that their proper sphere was housekeeping and the bringing-up of children. The vast majority of women not only made no claim to equality with men, but were opposed to those who did.¹ His book *De l'Egalité des deux Sexes* was favourably received by the *Précieuses* alone.²

The author of *Les Avantages du Sexe* admits that public opinion is directly opposed to him. “ C'est une témérité à moy de prendre leur party ” (i.e., le parti des femmes), he says.

(¹) *Egalité*.

(²) *Excellence des Hommes*.

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In Poulain's *Education des Dames* Timandre represents the popular opinion of the day, and his views are frankly antagonistic to the feminist ideas of his friends. He sees in the higher education of women merely a means of depriving them of their natural charm, and of producing that most undesirable type, the *Savante* or the *Précieuse*. He refuses to distinguish between what Sophie calls "les vraies savantes," and the *Précieuses*. The intellectual ladies of his acquaintance have all "l'esprit tourné précieusement." As for the *Précieuses* themselves, "Elles sont aussi fières que si elles estoient des Déesses et d'une autre espèce que leurs semblables. Quand elles sont dans un *cercle*, elles prétendent avoir droit d'y dominer comme des Reynes ; elles ne daignent pas regarder ceux qui les approchent, et croient faire beaucoup d'honneur à un homme que de tourner quelquefois les yeux de son costé. Celles qui ont un

mari, ou ne le comptent pour rien, ou ne le considèrent que comme leur premier domestique ; et celles qui n'en ont point, parlent des hommes comme s'il n'y en avoit pas un qui méritast de demeurer avec elles. On n'a point d'esprit, selon elles, lorsqu'on ne reçoit pas avec des marques d'adoration leurs maximes qu'elles proposent d'un ton d'oracle. Leurs gestes sont affectez, leurs termes recherchez. Elles s'écoutent parler avec admiration et elles écoutent parler les autres avec indifférence. Comme si l'on devoit un tribut de respect à chaque mot qu'elles prononcent, elles regardent si on ne les admire pas ; et l'on voit, quand elles ont cessé de parler, que leur amour propre leur fait faire sur elles-mêmes un certain retour de vanité, accompagné d'un air précieux, qu'il est plus facile de concevoir que d'exprimer."

Closely allied to the *Précieuse*, as Timandre remarks, was the *Savante*. Vanity was the

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prevailing characteristic of both, but whereas the *Précieuse* loved to reign as a queen in the midst of a circle of admirers who praised her wit and complimented her beauty, the *Savante* hungered less for personal flattery than for a reputation for learning. We have seen that the authors of *La Femme Gènereuse* and *Les Dames Illustres* were of this type. The professed object of their writings is to shew the superiority of women to men, but only in respect of their intellectual powers. They are quite content to leave administrative functions to the other sex. Their works are saturated with intellectual vanity, and, it is quite evident, are really written for the express purpose of providing their authors with an opportunity of displaying their erudition. The *Savante* wrote for her own circle and for her own glorification. Her attitude is well exemplified by the author of *La Femme Gènereuse*. She tells us that she devoted

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herself to study "par la contagion de la mode," and also because men had grown so degenerate as to occupy themselves solely "à recueillir quelques fleurettes de paroles," or in endeavouring by their polished manners and wit to gain the approbation of women. It was, therefore, for the latter to shew what could be done in the way of intellectual achievement. After reviewing man's failings, she adds, "Ce que les femmes reconnoissans, et se voyans d'ailleurs forcloses de l'administration de la police temporelle (que les masles disent tomber en quenouille, lorsque par succession naturelle on la voit eschoir aux femmes) elles se sont avisées de ne point contester leur part avec eux de la domination temporelle, et par une hauteur et éminence d'esprit ont entrepris de r'entrer au gouvernement du monde spirituel, et à la seigneurie que le premier masle avoit perdue." Men are now obliged "de venir à l'escole des femmes

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apprendre les mots de la mode, dont elles tiennent la régence (avec quelques hommes instruits par elles)." Women have entered into the possession of knowledge, "les Académies s'en tenans chez elles, où quelques hommes (qui se trouvent encore faméliques des belles lettres) se vont instruire, et recueillir les miettes de leur table. De façon que non seulement la morale, mais la Dialectique et Phisique retentissent en leurs maisons."

Apart, then, from this general interest in woman's status and education aroused by the Précieuses—an interest to which the feminist writings of the time are all, at least indirectly, traceable—there are two classes of writers whose works are due to their more immediate influence. The gallant, the man of fashion, the *Précieux* in fact, found in the feminist question a means of displaying his wit and of paying his homage to the divinities of the

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*ruelle*¹; to the *Savante*—herself a further development of the *Précieuse*—it afforded an opportunity of parading her learning, and of vaunting the intellectual heights which she and others of her kind had scaled.² It remains for us to see to what extent Poulain and other serious advocates of woman's cause came under this influence.

We have noticed how careful Poulain was to explain that he did not belong to the former of these two classes. Repeatedly he assures us that he has nothing in common with those who write “par galanterie ou par amour.” He assures Timandre that his *Egalité des deux Sexes* was written in all seriousness, and has nothing in common with works on kindred subjects by writers who looked upon their compositions as mere

(¹) Cf. Decrues and Vertron.

(²) Cf. The authors of *La Femme Généreuse* and *Les Dames Illustres*.

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“ jeux d’esprit.” “ Je suis en cela,” he adds, “ d’une humeur fort opposée à la plupart des hommes.”¹

That he is equally out of sympathy with *Précieuses* and professed *Savantes* is also made clear in the same work. Sophie, who is in full agreement with Stasimaque, and therefore represents Poulain’s views, replies to Timandre : “ Vous confondez les véritables sçavantes avec les Prudes et les Précieuses, que je hais tellement moy-mesme, quoyque je sois de leur sexe, que je ne m’étonne pas qu’elles soient insupportables aux hommes.” Elsewhere she explains that by “ véritables sçavantes ” she means intellectual women of the more reasonable type who do not parade their learning as do those who are “ savantes de profession.” After Timandre’s portrait of the typical *Précieuse* she remarks : “ Vous avez bien étudié ces poupées-là.” Stasi-

(¹) *Education Des Dames.*

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maque points out that he knows several intellectual ladies who are free from the disagreeable characteristics which mark the ordinary *Savante*. It is a shame, he says, that if a woman wishes to improve her mind by study she is promptly dubbed a *Précieuse*. 61520

It is clear that Timandre's dislike of *Savantes* and *Précieuses* was pretty general. He stands for the average educated man of his day. Stasimaque and Sophie, on the other hand, represent the serious feminist view which drew a sharp distinction between these two classes and the woman with intellectual tastes and a desire for fuller participation in the responsibilities of life.

Du Bosc, in claiming for women the right to a broader education than they usually obtained, deprecates "celles qui s'estudient trop à passer pour suffisantes." The author of *La Femme Généreuse* has already provided us with a good example. Jacqueline Guil-

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laume¹ is another to whom this description applies, in spite of her attempt to answer the charge of vanity which, she admits, is customarily brought against the *Savantes*.

Poulain also shews himself in opposition to the *Précieuses* by his condemnation of the *cercle* which drew its supporters largely from their ranks. He regarded it as prejudicial rather than helpful to woman's development. The conversation indulged in there partook too much of the nature of frivolous gossip to be really edifying. Women went to it "composées pour s'attirer de l'encens." It was there that the *Précieuses* claimed the right to "dominer comme des Reynes." Extravagant deference was paid to their utterances by those who took pleasure in flattering their sex. The author of *Les Entretiens de Théandre* speaks disparagingly of

(¹) Author of *Les Dames Illustres*.

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the "conversations tumultueuses dans les cercles."

That which above all else distinguishes Poulain and the other more serious writers from those who are directly under the influence of the *Précieuses* is his deep interest in the question of women's education. *Savantes* are eager to display their intellectual powers, and put forward the extravagant plea that women are in all respects superior to men; writers of the *Précieux* type, under the pretence of seriously discussing the relative merits of the sexes, pay gallant compliments to women, and parade their wit and literary skill. With these aims Poulain does not concern himself. At times, it is true, he is led on by the mere love of argumentation, by the natural zeal of the dialectician. His eagerness to shew, by precept and example, that we ought to overcome the power of prejudice and trust to pure reason for guidance in the

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formation of our opinions sometimes leads him to support a thesis which, on further consideration, he finds it necessary to modify. Much as he despises pedants, he himself is not entirely free from pedantry, and cannot always resist the temptation to draw upon his store of learning, as much, perhaps, for the satisfaction of his pride as for the edification of his readers. But even these pardonable weaknesses disappear when he touches on what is after all his principal theme, the just claims of woman for admittance to the temple of learning, the crying need for a radical improvement in her education. Of his three works, one is entirely devoted to this question.

The state of things prevailing in his day rouses his indignation, "Les maîtres et les instructions ne sont que pour les hommes," he says. Women are brought up in idleness, ignorance and luxury. Girls are never free from the vigilant eye of *gouvernante* or

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mother. Their conversation turns upon frivolities ; their only occupations are reading, writing and dancing. A few devotional books constitute their library ; needlework is their only accomplishment. They consult their mirror as an oracle, and look upon the *cercle* as an academy where they may hear the latest gossip. Those who are lucky enough to have the opportunity of improving their minds conceal the fact for fear of being dubbed “ *Précieuses*.” The poorer sort have no time for education. When girls attain the prescribed age, whether poor or rich, they must submit to a loveless marriage or the seclusion of the convent.¹

In the *Education des Dames*, Eulalie enters a strong protest against the ignorance of the woman of her day : “ Elle n’entend pas mesme son Pater ; elle ne sçait pas mesme ce que c’est qu’esprit.”

(¹) *Egalité des deux Sexes*.

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The author of the *Traité de la Liberté* describes the condition of women as “une contrainte servile, une stupide ignorance et une dépendence basse et ravallée.”

The failure of Poulain and other would-be reformers to effect any marked improvement or even greatly to influence public opinion is easily accounted for by the extravagance of less temperate writers with whom they were readily confused. The awakened interest in woman's education, which was traceable to the influence of the Hôtel de Rambouillet and the *Précieuses*, was soon killed by the folly and affectation of the very people who had been its original cause. The ridicule which they excited was fatal to serious interest in anything associated with their name. As regards the work of those writers, some of whose effusions we have considered, who may be looked upon as their immediate offspring, this ridicule was not unmerited, but Poulain

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and others of his school deserved a better fate. Indirectly, no doubt, their ideas were the result of the movement set on foot by the *Précieuses*, but they ~~stopped short of their~~ excesses and openly dissociated themselves from them. In spite of this they were classed with them in the public mind. Common-sense people had had enough of the *Précieuses* and their reign ; a reaction set in, and the pleadings of those who really had a message to deliver fell on deaf ears.

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